Skills shortages at Australia’s frontiers: big challenges, inventive solutions

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the Singapore Airlines Strategic Planning Day for 2007.

I hope you have received the circulated agenda. You will see that the first item is the issue of pilot recruitment. The second item is the issue of flight staff recruitment. The third item is the issue of maintenance staff recruitment. The fourth item is the well-being of and support for executive staff.

Sorry — wrong start!

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the Asset Partnership Strategic Planning Workshop for 2007.

We have circulated the agenda. I trust you received it by email in the various places where you were. I think today you have come from Karratha, Kalgoorlie, Mount Isa, Earnest Henry, Melbourne Water and a range of other places. I am immensely relieved that we have all managed to get together—cyclones notwithstanding.

Now, as I say, we did circulate an agenda. The first issue is the recruitment of engineers. The second issue is the recruitment of consultants. The third issue is the recruitment of support staff for our remote offices. The fourth issue is the support for technical systems in remote places. The fifth issue is accommodation and the sixth issue is staff well-being and morale.

Oh sorry, lost again! I was supposed to be at a Frontier Services Strategic Planning meeting. The trouble is, that the issues on the agenda are exactly the same.

- recruitment of staff
- recruitment of support staff
- accommodation for staff
- support for systems for staff; and critically,
- the well-being and morale of those who are trying to hold it all together.

It is easy to become disheartened, but I think we should take heart from the fact that, first of all, we are not alone.

We need to find humour in small things! We were highly amused in Sydney at the weekend to hear the Opposition leader announce the appointment (should he win office in a week or two) of 1500 additional nurses. Presumably he is going to conjure them out of hats, like rabbits.

It would be easy to rail against the extraordinary and, in my view, criminally irresponsible, lack of planning which has brought us to the place we are today, but on the other hand, it has provided us with the environment and the encouragement to try to find the solutions. And, in our industry, we are committed to find those solutions because we are committed to the needs of the people we serve.

I sat next to a member of Singapore Airlines senior staff on a flight to Perth last week and he was telling me that, worldwide, their challenge is the recruitment of pilots.

Huge issues, particularly in Australia, because pilots are only trained at (I think) three sites and the cost of the training is stupendous, but the cost of accommodating the trainees and supporting them is also very great.
An animated discussion across the aisle commenced with a person who is a geothermal engineer working out of an office in Blacktown in Sydney whose brother is an Air New Zealand pilot, who’d planned to retire, but is still in harness because Air New Zealand is suffering the same challenges in relation to pilots. As for his own office, it remains in Blacktown despite the fact that most of his work is in the Kimberley and the Pilbara because they are unable to find appropriate accommodation for their staff in those places.

And, are we any different?

When I manage to withdraw my thoughts from the challenges faced by our own organisation, I go home to a worried husband as one of the principals of the Asset Partnership. They have received two resignations from consultants in the last fortnight because of the amount of travel required. Both of them under pressure from their families to be at home (from time to time). But they are under extreme pressure from the mining industry to provide the support and services they need to facilitate the expansion which is currently occurring, but the pressure on human beings is almost intolerable.

And so, what happens?

The older, more experienced and those of us who perhaps grew up in a culture where we were more inclined to see ourselves as the servant of the system keep saying “yes” and those who have had a different exposure, can and do, and arguably must, say “no”.

So what are we doing to address these issues?

Frontier Services is a national agency of the Uniting Church in Australia and we provide services across the remotest parts of the continent. Nursing services, children’s services, patrol ministry and a range of other services, all of them calling on the skills and the commitment of professional people. Not only do we need to be able to recruit them at all, but we need to be able to recruit them and convince them that they would really love to live in Tennant Creek or Warmun or Mutitjulu, in Esperance or Weipa, in Hawker or in Derby.

So we have devised a range of responses to the challenges of recruitment and retention, and I would like to offer them to you today— not because we think they are the final answer, but in the hope that you may have some other ideas that we can adopt and perhaps some of those things which we’ve done will have use and currency in your own organisations.

It is hot and humid and a cyclone is threatening in Wyndham. Judy Kay, our manager there, is delighted to have had returned to her tiny little facility of nine beds, a resident who has recently suffered a stroke. It is great to have her home, and home it is, and Judy knows that there is a good chance of full recovery if occupational and other therapy can be provided.

The first strategy that we have adopted is to develop key networks everywhere we work. Because we are in so many centres in outback Australia, because we are in many places the only service with a long history and in a number of places the only provider with more than minimal representation of staff, we take it upon ourselves to have a key role in facilitating the bringing together of people and their knowledge in order that they can support, and refer to, each other.

For the situation like Judy’s resident, she is able then to call on Kimberley Health Services, on the Wyndham Hospital, on the services that are available in Kununurra, and then to be creative about how those services are accessed.

I won’t say we don’t manipulate the system, because we do. We unashamedly manipulate anything we can to provide access to the services which are so hard to find.

A HACC vehicle going to Kununurra might be used to transport the resident, or a carer respite visit, scheduled from our Kununurra service, might provide the opportunity for service to come to her.

We just refuse to be defeated by the boundaries that are around funding and program definition, and remain as flexible and creative as we possibly can be.
In the middle of Tasmania, it is cold and windy as Shoana pulls her coat about her and hurries off to the clinic. She had retired, as so many of our wonderful, experienced nurses have and been called back as so many of our wonderful, experienced nurses have.

And yet, for some people that works. They can do a couple of days a week or three, or half days or a couple of night duties—that suits them fine. And we have abandoned our original concepts of shifts and rosters and we work with people to identify what employment pattern will suit them best, and then as it were, piece it together.

Our remote area nurses work, week on/week off, so essentially they work twenty two weeks of the year. For some people, they prefer to work literally week on/week off, for others they may by mutual agreement work two or three weeks on/and have two or three weeks off.

For people restoring chateaux in Europe, (we have had one of those) and those who have beach front properties in South Australia, (we have had one of those too), this can be a very rewarding work pattern. And I think this is reflected in the fact that a number of our remote area nurses have been with us for fourteen and fifteen years.

Frontier Services, particularly in its days as the Australian Inland Mission, used to be bound by a policy of only allowing nurses to work for two years at a time. I think the theory was that they would then return to big centres and work in mainstream services, thus refreshing their experience and gaining additional training. Those days are long gone and we put significant emphasis on to training, funding at least one of our remote area nurses each year to attend the CRANA Conference and providing scholarship opportunities as we can for people to undertake other significant training.

In far west Queensland, a dad helps load toys back into the Nissan patrol after a Remote Area Families Services team has visited a property for a play group. We are pressing those who have retired into service.

Through a program called Outback Links we are connecting the needs of communities with the volunteer efforts available. There are thousands of retirees—and age is no impediment, only energy is required! We are connecting those who have the energy with the needs. And in some cases, that is a way to support the provision of services where nothing else can be achieved.

The most common use of Outback Links volunteers is to support the families we serve. Painting, fencing, cleaning, gardening, child minding, whatever…. Even those with limited professional expertise can lift the load, ease the burden and be a fresh face and a sign of hope. So Outback Links is another way in which we are addressing the shortages of trained personnel.

But right across the continent, skill shortages across communities services and the health sector are causing distress to both clients and program managers alike. So we have turned our mind to how we actually get bodies on the ground.

In remote aged care and in some other programs we are able to achieve that through supporting extensive training programs. In the past eighteen months, we have appointed a training co-ordinator for the Northern Territory and we are now recruiting training support officers for the Top End and the Centre, and their task is not necessarily to deliver the training but to support the program managers and to facilitate the mentoring and the installation of buddy-systems to ensure that trainees, apprentices and work experience students remain in place, but to take the load off the program managers while that occurs.

We are being creative about identifying the opportunities for training and for program development in situ. We are forging partnerships with the tertiary institutions and exploring ways in which we can provide the on-site training.

At Pulkapulkka Kari in Tennant Creek, Batchelor College is training twelve nursing candidates on-site. Six Indigenous and six non-Indigenous candidates, and these are the first non-Indigenous students that Batchelor has enrolled.
Our great focus is to train local people, particularly in the remote communities, so that they can provide the services in their own place. We are acutely conscious that the services we provide, while culturally sensitive, need to be provided by people for their own people in their own place to be culturally appropriate. And while we are committed to standing with Aboriginal communities in order to ensure that the services can continue to be provided, we are equally committed to being able to stand aside as soon as that can be done by the communities alone, and we will be there as a supporter and encourager.

But in addition to a whole range of innovative and creative solutions, the key, I think, to all of this is the network of support. We tend to run our organisation like an extended family.

We work hard at making people feel as though they are a part of a team and part of something much bigger and that is critically important.

We work hard at internal communication and we are blessed by enormous support across the continent. Providing training opportunities, providing opportunities to come together, maintaining a feeling that what you do is important, and that somebody knows that, and ensuring access to good resources and support at all times will help us to retain staff in to the future.

The biggest challenge continues to be our own ability to keep being creative, to keep being positive and not to become overwhelmed.

I must say that it is easy to be overwhelmed by the challenges that face even the city services, let alone those which are in far flung places, but we must encourage and support each other.

The very fact that we are here does that. All these creative minds addressing the same problem. We must continue to have a voice, we must continue to advocate for appropriate funding, for training, for as little bureaucracy as possible, in order to make opportunities as accessible to as many people as possible.

We must be realistic about skills versus education and while we celebrate the wonderful qualifications that people bring to these tasks, we need to recognise that there are many who can do the practical work, and particularly provide the care, extremely well, who can never produce the piece of paper to support that.

We need to ensure that governments meet their responsibilities to adequately fund services.

It is hypocritical to announce enormous packages which are based on funding already announced and which take us no further forward in terms of our ability to pay for the skills we need. Realistically good quality care for those in rural and remote Australia costs money, but people who live in rural and remote Australia are just as entitled to the services that their city cousins enjoy, and we must be prepared to insist that those funds flow, in order that we can say that the only additional measures we need to apply are those we can provide ourselves.

So, at the end of our Strategic Planning session, whether it be for Singapore Airlines, the Asset Partnership, Frontier Services or the National Rural Health Alliance, let our vision be that in remote Australia everybody has access to the services they need and they are of the quality that is deserved by those we serve.
Presenter

Rosemary Young is the National Director of Frontier Services. She is the first woman and the first layperson to hold that position, having previously served Frontier Services as National Community Services Manager from 1995 until January 2000. Rosemary has lived and worked in remote South Australia and brings a passion for the Outback to her role. Frontier Services is the successor to the Australian Inland Mission, founded by the Reverend Dr John Flynn and has been serving those isolated by distance for 95 years. Frontier Services cares for individuals and families living in isolated and remote areas through health care, family and children’s services, aged and disabled care, migrant services, community support, accommodation for students, counselling and a range of other community services, in addition to providing a patrol ministry covering 85% of the continent. Every year Frontier Services provides support to tens of thousands of people in Outback Australia, through over 450 staff and more than 75 programs. It is the largest provider of aged care in remote Australia. Rosemary is a member of the Australian Council of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, a member of the Board of Uniting Care Australia and has been a member of the Board of Governors of the Australian Council of Social Services and of the Commonwealth Personal Support Program Reference Group. She was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for her service to rural and remote Australia in 2006.