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**Title of Paper:** Opportunities and Challenges - Attracting Young People to Irrigation Careers

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(Under the Federal Government's 'Career Advice Australia' program which is administered by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The key target group for CAA is 13 to 19 year olds.

Note: Agri-Food covers agriculture, forestry and fishing, as well as food and beverage manufacturing and horse and dog racing.)

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**Abstract:** Opportunities and Challenges - Attracting Young People to Irrigation Careers

The present labour market situation is one of opportunity and shortages. We need a 21<sup>st</sup> Century approach to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century problems. The impact of change in the national and global economy and environmental impacts could result in shortages, inability to meet demand and, at worst, become a negative spiral. Having recognised such possibilities, we need people who can see the opportunities and seek them out.

The present situation is characterised by mis-matches:

- 'Old' versus 'young'
- 'Effort' versus 'ease'
- 'Aging' versus 'instant ability'
- 'Resource plenty' versus 'resource scarcity'
- 'I want you to...' versus 'I want to...'
- 'media view' versus 'reality'
- 'import labour now' versus 'develop skills here'
- 'service industries' versus 'primary and secondary industries'

Statistics

- shortages of people
- skewed age groups
- entry costs to business high
- migration to the coastline
- highly variable terms of trade

How has this come about

- Aging workforce
- Innovation
- Competition between industries

- Breakdown of rural communities
- Drought

Whose perspective should we look at the world from:

- Government, Industry, Enterprise, Parent / Carer, Teacher, Young Person?

Should young people be prepared (by their teachers and others) for a job, an occupation, a career, or for uncertainty?

Very tight labour market for the foreseeable future

- Opens and 'tightens' career options

Significantly different environment from that of the past.

- Fewer 'unskilled' jobs
- Need to be 'job ready' when starting
- The higher the level of education the better the job prospects and rewards
- The labour market is global not just state or national
- An occupation, profession or 'calling' may be the thread through multiple careers and industries

### Important people in career decision making

- The young person
- Parent / carer / guardian
- Peers
- Role models
- Teacher / teachers
- Career adviser
- Employer
- 'The Nation'

### Industry role

- 'Ownership' of career development
- Strategic and innovative self-promotion
- Involvement with schools
  - Young people, agriculture and primary industry teachers, career advisers
- Support for school and community-based projects
- Realistic (positive) industry stories
- Being available and present (for contact and at activities)
- Looking to the future

### **Introduction**

Industry engagement with young people can be achieved through direct contact and, more importantly, through programs established by State and Territory Governments. This paper promotes the Federal Government program, Career Advice Australia.

Increasing awareness of the irrigation industry and participating in activities available under the Career Advice Australia program will pay dividends in attracting young people into your business and industry.

### **Recommendation**

Involvement by individuals, with a strategic view of the irrigation industry, in promotion to young people, career advisers, parents and teachers, will raise awareness and improve the flow of career and job information. The result will keep the irrigation industry on, at least, an equal footing with other industries promoting themselves, and will result in an increase in the pool of talented young people who seek employment in the irrigation industry.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES - ATTRACTING YOUNG PEOPLE TO IRRIGATION CAREERS

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Throughout Australia, there are many opportunities for jobs and careers, but these opportunities are countered by shortages, particularly in resources such as water and skilled workers. It is also a time of adjustment – there are few periods in history that aren't – and we have to be careful that we do not sit around waiting for 'something to happen'. It may - and not be what we want.

It is up to us to think strategically and a few years ahead, not just to tomorrow. We need 21<sup>st</sup> Century solutions to 21<sup>st</sup> Century problems. Creative solutions; solutions that work for us; solutions that are tried and tested – we try solutions out and test them or adopt and adapt, if that is best.

The changes in climate and population are challenges we face. The competition in our own country for resources both physical and human will result in shortages, inability to meet demand, and, if not handled well, result in a negative spiral of change disrupting activity to the point where someone else, an industry or country – or both - will take advantage.

Taking a macro view, the mis-matches that are around are sources of major concern. Many industries have ageing workforces – mining may be the exception as there are significant monetary attractions to young people to take their trade and their skills into remote, and some not so remote areas.

“Hard work is just that – hard. I want to do something else so that my lifestyle is not impacted by having worked hard all day?”

“Why do I have to wait to be a supervisor / in-charge / the source of knowledge / the team leader?”

“Why should I have to be told to do something, I can make up my own mind – and anyway, it is different to what you want me to do.”

“Why would I want to work in an industry that has no public profile or, even worse, a negative profile – I know it has because it is not shown / shown on television – I never hear about it.”

From an employer's point of view, if the prevailing attitude in the pool of available workers is negative, why should they bother employing locally if there is the possibility of importing skills from overseas?

There is a strong emphasis on service industries for example, hospitality and financial services, and they are competing for the same young people – the ones we want in our industry.

Statistics show there are skills shortages; skewed age groups; the entry level costs of starting a business or buying in are high; and there is a significant shift of population to the coastline.

This has come about through significant change in the workforce over the last decade or so. The pool of skilled people, particularly in trades, does not flow from the public sector as it did before. The railway workshops have gone, the government housing departments, the printing works, parks and gardens and so on. This raises the question about investment in training – is it ok for the government to invest but not private enterprise? The answer may be that it is ok when the government does it but now that they don't, private enterprise must step in. Or should the cost be transferred back to schools, the vocational education and training sector and universities? If industry were to rely on 'someone else' to train, will people have the right skills when they come in at the entry, and more senior, levels?

There must be a mix of 'external' training as well as 'enterprise' training. Some enterprises are big enough to have a significant training capacity while small business has a delicate balancing act in recruiting able people who are already skilled and being available at 'the right price' – not to mention staying on for a reasonable amount of time.

Whole communities are breaking down – the move from regional, rural and remote areas is on. The 'fly in / fly out' workforce is a reality which means that the structure of 'support towns' has changed. And then there are floods and drought confirming a perception of shortage and hard-times.

So where does this get us too? We are all aware of change and symptoms – we also believe, in business, in what we do and want to do more of it. To do that, we have to attract others into our industry, into irrigation so more can be produced and sold and we can be surrounded by a pleasant environment – good for the soul - and the water that is available to us is used efficiently and in the right places.

Who then, is responsible for adjusting our system of recruitment so the industry not only survives but thrives? Is it the Government? Should they be assisting? There are many programs that can be tailored to assist – perhaps the hardest part is finding out and knowing how to access them.

Is it Irrigation Australia, the peak industry organisation; individual businesses; parents or carers; teachers; career advisers or the young person themselves?

It is everyone. An apparently trite answer but effective if you think about it. Young people are seeking information – they want to know what is available to them to accommodate their current passion or find a trigger that will awaken passion in them. There are three groups of young people to consider when thinking about providing information:

- i. There are those who don't know what they want to do and don't know how to find out more.
- ii. There are those who have a rough idea but need assistance, particularly to develop a dream or, more basic, select subjects for their last years at school.
- iii. There are those who know exactly what they want and the most important information for them is the contact details for an employer or for further education.

If we start from the perspective of young people – the group we are concentrating on here – the other organisations – Government, enterprise, parents, teachers and so on – can actively work together to achieve a suitable outcome.

Career Advice Australia, the program I represent, has a strong network that can be engaged to support the needs of industry and individual businesses, ranging from providing information to those who 'don't know', to supporting work experience, Australian School-based Apprenticeships, and Adopt-A-School programs. Through Irrigation Australia working with the CAA network, there is a direct industry connection to Government programs to increase effectiveness at local and regional level.

It is important to adopt direct contact and recognition of your 'target audience' as the most effective way of delivering your message.

Are you passionate and enthusiastic about what your industry offers? Deliver the message yourself to an individual or a group. Do you have young people working for you – and I know there are many already in your industry – who are themselves passionate and enthusiastic? They are your advocates – send them out with the message; record it on a dvd so it can be repeated and delivered to the ones who are further away.

What are you trying to do through direct contact and recognition? You are trying to have young people identify with working in the irrigation industry as a real career option – if they are not thinking in career terms, then promote the jobs you have in the industry. The distinction between

careers and jobs can be fine and even, sometimes, be interchangeable. Case study career paths – you will find there are many and varied ways for entry to the industry – some may have left and come back again - better for the experience and more valued than before.

Which leads to an associated activity – the activity of retention.

If we concentrate on attracting people into the industry, what does that say about the treatment of those already there? Do we take them for granted? Will the new entrants want to stay if they think that the objective is to 'lasso' someone and then forget about them?

Retention is as important as recruitment. If you are passionate, that will only rub off if your employees are treated as having worth. Being needed; genuinely being part of your business; being there to grow and develop with you and your business. There is a wider point which I will talk about later, of 'industry'.

I recently heard Mick Keelty, Australian Federal Police Commissioner, talk about leadership. In his speech delivering The Lt-Col. Ralph Honner Leadership Oration, on 29 February 2008, he said:

"The role of leaders is to determine what is best for the situation they and their people are confronting. It is never a 'one size fits all' arrangement. Leadership requires precision understanding of human behaviour and the ability to know the capacity of every individual working for you.

We all know our personal limitations and how far to push ourselves. Leaders need to know that about themselves and the people they lead."

You are industry leaders, you are the leaders of your business.

Mick Keelty also spoke of the qualities of leaders:

"Modern leadership theory suggests there are five traits, above all others, which people look for in a leader. Those traits are honesty, forward-looking, competent, inspiring and intelligent. I would add one other – passion. Passion without ego but passion with humility."

I include this quotation as we must be forward-looking, join our young people in looking to the future as they have all of theirs in front of them.

Retention is not just about money. It is also about recognition, personal development and esteem. Being proud of what you do. Often, people think that everyone else is different. Could it be that whatever motivates you could motivate someone others? Work out for yourself what is needed to keep people in your business. Look at what other businesses and industries do and see if that could apply to your situation.

I referred to 'industry' earlier. Do you feel you have an obligation to your industry? Your presence at this Conference says you do. Then think about the pros and cons of movement of people within your industry. At the very least, there are regional differences in what you do. New techniques and approaches are being developed all the time. You keep abreast of them through trade magazines, conferences and talking to others. Why not accept movement of people within the industry as a positive activity? You don't have to actively encourage the departure of a valued employee but if they do decide to leave – whether it be to another irrigation position or even to another industry, celebrate their departure with them – and then welcome them back if later they decide they want to be 'home' or they decide there is a future for them with your business. As an aside, Mick Keelty also referred to the need to have people around who question, who want to know why or why not. Who have a different point of view. A recipe for strengthening your business and reputation as a business and employer.

There is a continuum of action which starts in the awareness raising actions; school visits to your business - the 'excursion' where you are descended upon by dozens of eager and noisy school children who want to touch everything and don't seem to take much notice of anything. This is one

of the first steps in raising awareness of your industry. What dividend does it pay? None - immediately. Possibly none at all for some children. But you – your business, your industry - are there. You are competing with the fire station, the hospital, a construction site, by raising awareness about you and what you do. How does that benefit later?

It benefits by tapping into the increasing emphasis on careers and industry promotion. Helping young people - from earlier age groups as time goes on – start to think about what they want to do, and, perhaps just as importantly, what they don't want to do. That's right, be part of their decision making process and help them make decisions that may include not wanting to be in your industry.

I briefly mentioned Government programs. The Federal program, Career Advice Australia, supports an industry-based network operating right across Australia – there is a Local Community Partnership near you; there is a Regional Industry Career Adviser who covers your region; and I am there, at the national level, to support and promote your industry and others within the Agri-Food industry grouping.

The system we are working in is partly defined by there being fewer and fewer 'unskilled' jobs. Yes, product has to be lifted and moved, there is still a lot of manual handling, but there is also more and more computerisation and automation – replacing labour with capital and improving economies of scale. Young people need to know more when they start work – although I have met employers who say they 'employ on attitude and train on-the-job.' Even in that situation, the employers are relying on young people having developed those attitudes during their school years.

By being involved, promoting your industry, you can show how innovative it is, how 21<sup>st</sup> Century and engage with young people who are seeking their future.

Statistics show that the higher level of education an individual can attain, the better their job prospects and rewards. That is a fact. It is not something that you can change as it is up to the individual to realise. You can help by encouraging personal development beyond the level at which the person comes into your business, keeping in mind, of course, Mick Keelty's observations about knowing your staff.

Your industry is both national and global – so is the labour market. For your industry, awareness of this will enable you to understand why there is movement. Can you offer a travel opportunity? Can you advise on places to go for development?

Young people are being brought up understanding that there is no such thing as 'your career', singular. Everyone will be faced with multiple careers during their working life. Many of you here today, if not all, will already have experienced this. Your awareness will help you to understand your new recruit, particularly when they seek opportunities elsewhere. It also enables you to think strategically, about what you can offer with a career focus and not just a repetitive job, which becomes a repeat of the four seasons every twelve months.

When you do find young people to come to you for work experience – just putting your hand up will mean that they will find you – don't judge all by one. There will be the very special ones who you don't want to lose, there will also be the ones who you can't see the back of soon enough. Think about each one and think about your role in their experience. Know that there are many good potential employees around – it is just that you, a business leader, have to compete with other businesses and industries and it is finding the formula that suits you that matters.

To sum up, there is an opportunity to be 'someone else'. You know, I am sure, that you have 'someone else' on your payroll – how often do you hear 'must have been someone else who did that' or, 'I am sure there must be someone else who does that'. You can be the 'someone else' who represents your industry at school and community activities and career expos.

There are other "someone else's" around. They are working in schools as career advisers and teachers; they are working in Local Community Partnerships; they are Regional Industry Career Advisers and I am working with your industry association, Irrigation Australia, to support you and the Career Advice Australia.

The focus is on your community and support for what you and our young people want to achieve – jobs and careers for a successful partnership. If you don't have direct communication with young people, through their schools, seek out your Local Community Partnership. Think of the future and the perception that you would like young people to have of your industry – and then be part of the promotion of your industry.