

My experience:

Before starting my training as a sustainability assessor, I worked in the Information Technology sector designing and programming computer systems. I had been working in the industry for approximately 20 years but felt that I wanted a new career.

I selected the area of sustainability because I felt that the industry can only go from strength to strength, will be at the forefront of innovation in the coming years and can only grow in importance, both in Australia and worldwide.

I resigned from my previous employment and commenced training at the start of October, paying \$1500 for my training course that ran part-time, two days a week, for 4 weeks (there was also research and test reports to be conducted during the 4 week period in addition to this official study time). I completed training at the end of October and was informed that to apply for the Green Loans program I had to apply through the Association of Building Sustainability Assessors (ABSA).

The application process required that I obtain a police check, which cost \$32 and obtain Personal Liability and Professional Indemnity insurance at a cost of \$750. The application fee was \$660, with ABSA stating that part of this fee was to pay for ABSA membership. No option for optional membership of ABSA was offered. No alternative way of applying to become a sustainability assessor under the Green Loans scheme was offered.

This means that to get into a position where I could apply to become accredited as an assessor for the Green Loans scheme, my total cost was \$2942.

On returning from a short, previously planned family holiday at the end of November, I received all required documentation and was in a position to apply for accreditation on 8th December 2009, and did so. I received an email from Nicola Curnow (sent on behalf of Jen Than) from ABSA acknowledging receipt of my application on 23rd December 2009 (thirteen days after posting the application). This email also gave me a guide and timeline for the application process. The following is extracted from the received email;

Your payment will be processed within the next 10 business days. Once processed, a receipt will be emailed to you.

Your application will then be processed and you will be emailed your certification ID number within another 10 business days.

Once you have received your assessor ID number you should download and complete a contract from the Green Loans website at www.environment.gov.au/greenloans and post it to DEWHA at the address listed on the form.

After you have received the email notifying you of your assessor ID your ID card will be posted to you within 10 working days.

By 18th January 2010, 15 working days after receiving this email, I had heard no further information and could see in my bank account that no money had been withdrawn. I called ABSA and stated that no application fee had been processed. By the end of that working day, I received a tax invoice from Priyanka Rahman on behalf of ABSA by email. In the same email, I received the following guidelines;

Your Accreditation Number will be processed and emailed to you within the next 10 Bus. days. Your id card will be posted 7 Bus. days after that.

On 29th January 2010 I received an email from Naima Ross on behalf of ABSA, providing me with my assessor number, and containing a link where I could obtain a copy of the DEWHA contract, which had to be signed and returned to DEWHA. In this contract, DEWHA required that all applicants have an ABN (which will have incurred further cost for some people, having to either register as a sole trader or incorporate). I obtained this contract, read and signed it, and returned it to DEWHA by post on 1st February 2010.

After hearing of the changes made on 19th February 2010, I contacted the phone numbers provided for enquiries on the DEWHA Green Loans website. I wanted to enquire about my contract status, but was told that no information was available. I then enquired as to whether my contract had been received by DEWHA, but was told that no information regarding assessor applications would be made available.

On the date of writing this (Wednesday 7th April 2010), this is my current situation.

My concerns regarding this process are;

1. To get to the position where anyone could apply to become an assessor, I had to spend nearly \$3000. Given that we have been constantly reminded that there is no guarantee of work, this outlay should be difficult to justify. Requiring items such as insurance is understandable, but requiring proof at application time means that I am insured (and have been insured since 3rd November 2009) for a job I'm unable to perform.
2. Membership of ABSA has been compulsory as a part of the application process. In any other industry practise, this would be considered 'third line forcing'. Why was this allowed?
3. Why was ABSA selected to be the processor for applications? I understand that, before the commencement of the Green Loans program, the membership of ABSA was approximately 400. That has now increased by approximately 2,600%. If figures are correct, 10,000 people paid \$440 for their applications to be processed (a total of \$4,400,000). Given that anyone applying also had to take up membership of ABSA, ABSA has also received \$2,200,000 in membership fees due to this compulsory membership.
4. During the application process, ABSA issued several notices that led me to believe that applications were building but DEWHA were not taking advice from ABSA. This leads me to believe that there was no communication between ABSA and DEWHA.
5. DEWHA did not attempt to keep track of the number of applications, or of organisations offering training. This information should be available, given that they approved Registered Training Organisations and could get figures to gauge applications for future training programs.
6. The communication between DEWHA (and latterly DCCEE) and applicants and / or assessors has been, and still is non-existent.

Given the requirements for insurance and an ABN, it can be inferred that people are expected to run a business. Under the current circumstances, that is not possible. According to figures from ABSA there are approximately 3,000 people in a situation similar to mine. We have been accredited by ABSA but have not received a contract from either DEWHA or DCCEE. Through no fault of our own, we are unable to work at our chosen new professions. We have not been given any date as to when a decision will be made to give us a contract to commence work, we do not even know whether we will be given a contract or not. We cannot make a decision as to where our future lies. This is a totally unacceptable situation.

Suggestions:

- The first step must be to decide who will be issued a contract, and who will not. People who have not been accepted can then make a decision on their future.
- The reputation of the scheme is badly tarnished, both in the eyes of the general public and with many disillusioned assessors. This needs to be addressed. Communication from the government departments must be improved, decisions (and the reasons behind them) must be transparent.
- An auditing process to ensure the appropriateness and quality of assessments must be enacted.
- There is no Continuing Professional Development (CPD) scheme in place. If the Sustainability industry is to be taken seriously, the level of training and continuing development has to be at the highest possible level. The industry should aspire to be as professional as possible for our customers and for ourselves.
- The scheme should be run by a third party on behalf of the government. The third party will be the party that deals with assessors, and acts on behalf of the government performing the duties currently performed by DEWHA / DCCEE. Any third party applications should be put to tender and run transparently to ensure fairness and gain the confidence of assessors (the relationship between Field Force and DEWHA is both well known and detested by all assessors).
- The scheme must be run in a professional manner. When applying, assessors are required to have insurance and have an ABN, the implication being that they are professionals. They need to be treated as such, and the organisation that they deal with (whether it be a government department or a third party acting on behalf of the government) needs to be professionally run.
- Has the government considered charging a small fee for the assessment? Because the assessment is free, people attach that value to the assessment process. The fee should be small (\$20 for example) and should not be an attempt to make money, but should cover administration, it would also put it into the mind of the house holder that the assessment is of value.
- The scheme was designed to be a temporary scheme. This should remain the case, but efforts should be made to help assessors into a position where the provision of sustainability assessments can be run as a viable business without government support.