

Senate Committee Inquiry – Employment in the transport industry

Submission from Main Roads Western Australia

Background

Main Roads Western Australia is a major statutory authority responsible for the State's highways and main roads, which have a replacement value of \$21.4 billion. It is one of the agencies in the Planning and Infrastructure Portfolio created by the State Government to integrate land use and transport planning. It is also one of WA's longest serving public sector organisations with a proud history of retaining a diverse range of employees for the duration of their careers. We pride ourselves on offering a total package of flexible work options in order to make our organisation an Employer of Choice. This has ensured that we have stayed competitive in the job market, despite the resource boom in Western Australia.

One of Main Roads' key areas of focus, as identified in the Strategic Plan 2003 – 2007, is "Sustaining Network Operations", where the strategic objective is to maximise the safety and efficiency of the road network. Main Roads' Heavy Vehicle Operations (HVO) function has a significant role to play in achieving this objective by regulating the use of heavy vehicles in Western Australia. The HVO transport inspectors are authorised under law to intercept and inspect vehicles in WA. This includes checking vehicles for compliance with mass and dimension limits, and ensuring that high productivity and oversize vehicles are operating in accordance with the conditions set down under Main Roads' permits, notices and accreditation. Other tasks include inspecting vehicles for roadworthiness, load security, driver and vehicle licensing conditions, and under an arrangement with the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection, ensuring compliance for the movement of dangerous goods. Consequently, it is critical that we have the right people at the right time to carry out this function.

Recruitment Challenges

Prior to 2002, Main Roads was experiencing significant difficulties in attracting the right applicants to fill vacant transport inspector positions. At that time, the selection criteria for the role were weighted in favour of a prescriptive set of skills particularly emphasising the applicant's ability to carry out the physical elements of the job, such as lifting heavy equipment weighing up to 17kg.

The focus of the role was also significantly based around enforcement and tended to be overly reliant on legislative 'solutions', such as imposing penalties, rather than on education and working with industry to ensure drivers were informed about their legal requirements. Consequently, the enforcement nature of the work coupled with the emphasis on the applicant's physical ability to do the job meant that very few applicants were considered to be suitable to carry out the function. In 2002 there were 170 applicants and only two were suitable to appoint to positions.

A Revised Approach

The continued viability of the Transport Inspector function meant that a revised approach to recruitment was required, in line with our philosophy of looking to employ creative and innovative solutions to attract and retain staff when the need arises. As a result, in 2002 the Main Roads Human Resources Directorate worked with HVO to develop a revised set of selection criteria for the transport inspector function, with a focus on a broader set of generic skills. This less prescriptive approach coincided with the introduction of the Western Australian Heavy Vehicle Accreditation Scheme. This scheme requires accredited operators to have a Maintenance Management and Fatigue Management System established and working in their company. Standards were also established in regards to a range of areas, including:

- Training and education
- Trip rostering
- Workplace conditions
- Daily vehicle checks

The introduction of this scheme, which had a focus on working with and educating industry to ensure compliance, meant that a different skills set was required for Transport Inspectors in order to maximise the success of the new approach. Consequently, it was timely to introduce more generic criteria for the positions, such as interpersonal and communications skills. This would not only enable them to carry out the function more effectively but also expand the number of people who could competitively apply for a position.

The revised approach has proved to be very successful. In 2003, 10 applicants were recommended for Transport Inspector positions and since then two other rounds of recruitment have resulted in a significant number of suitable applicants.

Career Pathways

At Main Roads, considerable importance is placed on workforce planning and making strategic workforce decisions today to ensure our organisation is equipped with the right resources, skills and competencies to deliver our services tomorrow and into the future. The changes made to the way Transport Inspectors are recruited has had benefits beyond the immediate requirement to fill such positions. We have found that the successful candidates are versatile enough to move into a variety of positions in HVO, as operational requirements arise. Enabling our employees to make these transitions across Main Roads' workforce is very much in line with our flexible approach, which does not 'lock in' people to specific roles indefinitely. To maximise the success of this workforce planning initiative, Main Roads has introduced a program which partners new and experienced Transport Inspectors on a fortnightly basis, working around the state. This gives the new Inspectors a comprehensive understanding of all of the various aspects of the industry, so that when vacancies arise in other areas of HVO, or in other branches of Main Roads, they have a competitive advantage. For example, some Transport Inspectors have made the transition to Main Roads' Highway Emergency Response Operations team, which monitors the freeways to assist motorists in need.

By providing the opportunity for a career pathway, we have found that Main Roads has become a much more attractive career option for people who may not otherwise have considered a career as a Transport Inspector. Given the transport and logistics industry is facing an ageing workforce and difficulties attracting young people to the profession, we would certainly advocate a "career pathways" approach which includes recruiting for generic skills and then offering training to the successful applicants to enable them to move beyond their initial roles. This approach will contribute towards the sustainability of the industry.

Image of the Industry

There are certain perceptions about the transport industry and the prevailing working conditions that may be contributing to the difficulties in attracting new recruits. We believe that inroads can be made in the way the industry is marketed to negate this negative perception. For example, the recently introduced system of heavy vehicle accreditation in Western Australia is enshrined within legislation and amongst other things, provides for better Occupational Safety and Health conditions for drivers. This is a positive development that that should be promoted by industry.

Main Roads WA is currently working on a range of initiatives which are also designed to

improve conditions for truck drivers. We have developed a strategy to introduce more rest areas which will improve fatigue management and the safety of the road network. Main Roads is also investigating the establishment of 'service centres' which will provide truck drivers with a range of facilities including showers, sleep areas and hot meals, as well as fuel.

Recommendation

Main Roads has successfully implemented a number of initiatives that will ensure the continuing viability of our Transport Inspector function. This is in line with our goal to be an Employer of Choice, offering flexible work arrangements and using creative solutions to attract and retain staff. We believe that there is the potential for a similar approach to be taken by industry, in order to attract and retain staff and mitigate the impending workplace deficit.

Main Roads recommends that companies in the Transport and Logistics industry:

- consider broadening the scope of any selection criteria used when recruiting new staff, with a view to incorporating a range of generic skills (as well as relevant specific skills) in order to widen the potential pool of applicants. Incorporating generic skills into the criteria may also contribute to succession management by enabling successful recruits to move into other roles within the business as vacant positions arise.
- investigate the creation of 'career pathways' and promote these to increase the attractiveness of the industry. This has proven to be a successful initiative for Main Roads.
- promote the positive aspects of the industry, particularly those elements which contribute to enhanced health and safety, in order to dispel some of the negative perceptions that may exist amongst the community.