Workforce: what’s the strategy?

The community services and health workforce is growing twice as fast as other industries in Australia and will generate one in four of all new jobs in the next few years, yet already it struggles to attract, retain and properly skill workers. Wallis Westbrook looks at the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Much discussion occurs within the community services and health industry\(^1\) about the future of the workforce and what it will take to design, plan, implement and evaluate better, integrated and more tailored services. In my mind this can be answered relatively simply – plan effectively for the workforce the industry will require. The first step is to understand what we want our business and organisations to be and to deliver, and then to describe the jobs and skills we need to make this happen.

Community services and health employers face many of the same workforce challenges as do employers in other industries:

- an ageing workforce
- increased competition for traditional labour sources
- improved engagement and use of the skills of the existing workforce
- leadership and management for innovation
- difficulty attracting and retaining skilled staff
- a complex education and training system and its perceived failure to deliver work-ready graduates in the time, volumes and locations required.

A further challenge specific to community services and health employers is a wide lack of understanding of the types of work and jobs that exist across the industry. There is a strong perception within the community that community services work is mostly voluntary or that you have to be a special person to do it: ‘I could never do that sort of job…’ is a response many of us have heard.

Finally, all industries are focusing on productivity and global competitiveness. This is a debate the community services and health industry at best has been reluctant to enter and at worst denies any relationship to, even to the point of not accepting that it is, in fact, an industry. It is struggling to find its place in this influential economic agenda and yet it is one of the cornerstones upon which industry development strategies and skills and workforce investment priorities are based.

To tackle these and the many other issues that employers face in attracting, developing and retaining their future workforce, the industry must articulate its central position (social and economic) and enhance its workforce planning and development capacity. Employers and the industry must engage fully in describing and profiling careers and work across the industry and communicate the opportunities to people wanting to work in meaningful and stimulating roles. Critically organisations should work together, positioning the industry by using the significant social and economic contribution it makes to the nation’s prosperity and the real difference that it can make to lives, from both frontline or backend positions.

The Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (AWPA) recently released a discussion paper titled Future Focus: Australia’s skills and workforce development needs. Using four economy-wide scenarios to underpin industry and occupational growth modelling, it identifies that Health Care and Social Assistance will be the main employment growth industry to 2025 and that Community and Personal Services Workers will be in the top two highest growth occupations.\(^2\) Australian Bureau of Statistics labour force data (Table 1) reinforces the outlook on a state and territory basis.

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1. This article refers throughout to the community services and health industry, rather than sector as it more commonly known. This is deliberate and seeks to reinforce the contribution that organisations and the system make to the overall economic and social prosperity of the nation. Denying we are an industry denies our economic impact and potentially limits our access to industry development strategies and resources.

The AWPA will develop a National Workforce Development Plan based on this demand, but it is even more important for the industry to use this position effectively to attract, retain and develop its workforce. The community services and health industry is increasing at twice the average rate of all other industries, and is expected to generate around one in four of all new jobs by 2015–16. Yet follow the media and political agenda and most people would assume that it is other industries – resources, manufacturing, construction or others – that are facing the greatest impact of workforce and skill shortages. The availability of labour and skills is the most significant threat to the future viability of community services and health organisations. The success or failure of services and programs will depend on the ability to attract and retain the workers with the right skills. If we can’t offer attractive jobs, work out what skills are needed, and train people to have them, service models will become impossible to deliver. Workforce issues need to be elevated in the strategic approach of organisations, industries, programs and regions.

In Queensland the Health and Community Services Workforce Council has been working closely with industry to develop workforce planning capability not just at the individual level, but at organisational level and within a place-based approach. In partnership with industry organisations, it has developed a range of practical strategies, aiming to create a shared understanding of common workforce issues and to support collaborative problem-solving. Some of the tools have included:
- regional workforce development networks
- industry workforce leaders groups
- working with schools and other industries
- an industry workforce planning framework and development strategy
- brokering skills and training opportunities
- staff exchange programs
- cross organisational mentoring
- remote area support services
- communities of practice
- action research and learning approaches
- developing participatory leadership skills
- recognising and sharing workforce innovation through industry awards and conferences.

The availability of labour and skills is the most significant threat to the future viability of community services and health organisations.

In the face of significant change and reform, new ways of working, new skills and new roles are emerging. Increased sophistication in choice and control amongst consumers and a drive to innovation and outcomes requires the industry to work collaboratively, apply strong organisational development and business planning processes and clearly plan for the skilled workforce it requires into the future.

To attract the next generation of employees and to continue to retain and develop existing workers, health and community services organisations need to develop and prioritise workforce planning and development as a key sustainability strategy.

Wallis Westbrook is Executive Director of the Health and Community Services Workforce Council in Queensland.

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Table 1:

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<th>State/Territory</th>
<th>Employed persons</th>
<th>Health Care &amp; Social Assistance employed persons</th>
<th>Health Care &amp; Social Assistance employed persons (%)</th>
<th>Health Care &amp; Social Assistance industry rank by total employed</th>
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