

Non Technical Summary

FRDC Project 2008-334:	A scoping study to investigate the feasibility of a national seafood industry exchange program (human capital mobility)
-------------------------------	--

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Andy Bodsworth

ADDRESS: Cobalt Marine Resource Management Pty Ltd
PO Box 220
Dickson ACT
Office Ph: 02 62498698
Andy.Bodsworth@cobalt.net.au

OBJECTIVES:

1. Demonstrate knowledge transfer via a pilot seafood industry exchange program
2. Lay foundation for the development of a national seafood industry exchange program
3. Identify seafood industry labour force mobility barriers, and identify possible solutions

Project Outcomes

Outcomes from this project include a comprehensive review of the theoretical and practical considerations surrounding the introduction of workforce exchange programs in the Australian seafood industry (wild catch and aquaculture). Greater workforce mobility for the industry has the potential to move valuable human resources to areas of high need, whether seasonal or ongoing; and to build workforce capacity through targeted training, on the job learning, and transfer of valuable skills, experience, and knowledge.

This can make a very positive contribution to the long term sustainability and profitability of Australia's seafood industry, by building its adaptive capacity and resilience in a challenging and changing business environment.

NON TECHNICAL SUMMARY:

This FRDC Tactical Research Fund scoping study to investigate the feasibility of a national seafood industry exchange program was initiated in the face of significant labour force constraints and related challenges for the wild catch and aquaculture sectors. Project objectives were to enable a small number of crew/worker exchanges in the wild catch and aquaculture sectors, develop a national seasonal map of fishing and aquaculture labour demand, and explore the foundations for a national level seafood industry people exchange program.

The initial proposal flagged several dimensions to learning and related productivity improvements for the seafood industry. Work-based (or kinesthetic) learning was recognised to be well aligned with the learning profile of the industry, and the nature of its work. Higher level learning and skills related priorities for the seafood industry were identified as:

- Attraction of workers
- Adoption of higher level skills across the workforce
- Adoption and diffusion of new research, practice and technology across the industry, and
- Workforce retention and effective skills utilisation

Initially the project was focussed on identifying suitable fisheries and aquaculture operations that could take part in actual workplace exchanges. As the project progressed it became apparent that these would be very difficult to arrange within the limited time and resources for the project. Early in 2010 the project approach was re-oriented to deliver a more theoretical appreciation of mobility programs against the stated objectives.

A national seasonal map describing peak employment periods and supporting information for all of the larger wild catch and aquaculture sectors was the first major output for the project. It was then used to guide the selection of exchange candidate fisheries and then industry representatives within those fisheries/aquaculture sectors.

Although the project did not result in any actual workplace exchanges taking place, the experience of trying to arrange them suggests several important *real life* mobility barriers were present. These informed project findings, and reiterate the fundamental importance of understanding practical industry perspectives, and with them the more influential drivers that could enable success for a future national program.

In part the absence of exchanges is attributed to industry's reluctance to get directly involved in exchanges, despite widespread fishing and aquaculture industry support for the exchange concept. It also reflects the risks for businesses in committing scarce and valuable staff resources to a fledgling project with some operational risk, and somewhat intangible outcomes. Direct competition between businesses for valuable labour is also an issue. Most sectors of the wild catch and aquaculture industry are (not unreasonably) pre-occupied with day to day business and its risks and challenges. Whilst understandable, this approach undervalues the truth that today's strategic planning will mitigate tomorrow's crises.

The project briefly explored seafood industry demographics, recognizing that the demographic outlook is very challenging. The industry has one of the highest median age workforces in Australia, and low numbers of younger workers entering the workforce.

Existing mobility programs in the seafood industry were explored and results suggest very few active examples despite an obvious need. The more formal programs identified were more focused on exchanges between industry and universities, or between universities themselves. This recognition of

the importance of such initiatives, in a sector that is entirely focused on learning, education, and the adaptation and adoption of knowledge and skills, is noteworthy.

Several aquaculture enterprises are currently running private business to business exchange programs focused on the development of directly relevant work skills. Industry stakeholders like these were strongly supportive, and had personally observed substantial value from smaller scale business to business, or one off mobility initiatives.

The project developed a strong conceptual framework describing the attributes of a successful seafood industry mobility program; and the key industry and broader stakeholder capabilities needed to sustain one. Whilst Australian mobility research is scarce, the Australian industry consensus was that these programs could provide both short and long term benefits for productivity, particularly through improved knowledge management.

Evidence obtained during the project identified a range of specific benefits from exchange programs. At an enterprise level these were improved staff knowledge, skills and retention; improved definition around career and skills pathways; better technical awareness, improved use of technology, and generation and diffusion of ideas and new working approaches. At an individual level they were focussed on improved professional and social networks; development of specific and valuable skills; and improved access to valuable training and development opportunities.

A range of key success factors for mobility programs were identified. These centred on improving industry knowledge about exchange benefits and opportunities, and enabling strong collaboration and connectivity to increase awareness. The internet and professional and personal networks were key transmission channels. Fundamental issues like Occupational health and Safety compliance, management of professional and legal risks, and establishing strong communities of practice to help enterprises, and individuals arrange positive, well designed and well implemented mobility programs.

Key mobility barriers were identified as

- Lack of awareness within industry and more broadly
- High transaction costs associated with an exchange placements
- Legal and administrative barriers
- Lack of opportunities for quality placements, and
- Lack of research on mobility, and inadequate articulation of benefits at various levels.

Human capacity remained a consistent theme in the project outcomes. At a time of great challenge for the industry, people development is fundamental. It can drive workforce efficiency, then productivity, and profitability.

Recommendations and issues for further development have been identified and should be considered alongside the existing challenges and priorities facing industry. Further work is required to design an appropriate national level seafood industry exchange program. This should include clearer definition of

the benefits and costs likely to accrue to the industry and other key stakeholders from such a program. The FRDC's People Development Program should have a key oversight role in this regard. A partnership with the Agrifood Industry Skills Council to further develop and trial an exemplar project could maximize opportunities for enhancing skills development aspects, and the dissemination of results to other businesses and sectors.

Project findings reinforce the initial concept that there is a need for improved workforce mobility in the seafood industry. This is particularly so for the wild catch sector which faces serious workforce challenges in the immediate and near term. There is little doubt that a cost effective and efficient workforce exchange program could be set up for the aquaculture and wild catch industries however initial implementation, and ongoing success, will require genuine commitment from industry leaders and key government agencies.

Finally, unless the recommendations are considered by stakeholders, prioritized according to broader sectoral imperatives, and then appropriately resourced, it is highly likely that the potential value from some aspects of the project won't be realized.

Key Words: seafood industry, work-force, mobility, mobility barriers, labour, skills, exchange program, human capacity, industry culture, wild catch, aquaculture.