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Virtual. Learning

MANAGING A BUSINESS IN A RURAL AREA IS DIFFICULT, AND A LACK OF RESOURCES AND STAFF CAN BE OVERWHELMING.



In this issue of *Australia's Best Manufacturing*, we talk to Kevin Dwyer, Director of Change Factory, about how virtual learning is helping rural manufacturers keep up with their big-city competition.

***Australia's Best Manufacturing:* Why is it so important to attract workers to rural areas?**

Kevin Dwyer: The drain of rural workers, particularly young people aged 15–24, to urban areas of Australia has been significant. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that from 1996 to 2001, more than 91,000 young people moved from rural areas to large-population centres. While the mining boom in the last half of the decade reversed these trends in specific towns, such as Paraburdoo and Mackay, it did not reverse the overall trend. The implication for farming communities and businesses of this drain of young talent has been an increased reliance on an ageing population with little or no sense of renewal.

By contrast, the benefits of attracting skilled workers have been shown in a study to be both economic and social – skilled workers inject money into a community by leasing or buying property, while business owners obviously employ local people. Skilled workers also bring new skills and fresh perspectives, providing education and training to local workers, thereby increasing the capacity of the local workforce.

***Australia's Best Manufacturing:* How can companies encourage rural workers?**

Kevin Dwyer: The three most important factors in attracting new talent are perception of the rewards, opportunity, and the organisation itself; and unfortunately for companies, the drivers of perception of the organisation will be different for different individuals. Drivers of perception cover a wide range and include diversity, technological edge, market share, brand strength, ethics, social responsibility and empowerment. The elements of ethics, ►



diversity and empowerment can be powerful counters to any weaknesses in elements such as brand strength and market share.

The composition of elements that attract talent to a company in a rural community are not different to those that attract talent to a company in an urban community. However, in most cases, there is a need to provide a stronger counterbalance to the perceived negatives of a rural location, such as isolation from family and friends, and reduction in services in comparison with their home location. This may be accomplished by a combination of compensation, opportunity, and the nature of the organisation. The stronger the organisation's nature and the opportunities it provides, the lower is the level of compensation benefits required to balance the perceived negatives.

Australia's Best Manufacturing: How can businesses retain their rural workers?

Kevin Dwyer: The key to retaining talent is similar to the key to initially attracting that talent. Most important are perceptions of the other staff, the work, and the organisation itself.

The biggest contribution to a person's perception of the people they work with is the quality and approach of those in leadership positions. Studies have

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suggested that the most important attributes of leaders which drive discretionary efforts of their people are:

- commitment to diversity
- demonstrated honesty and integrity
- adaptation to changing circumstances
- clearly articulated organisational goals
- possession of job skills.

The work itself is also a strong determinant of retention of talent. Business travel and a good level of work–life balance may provide a counterbalance to any negative perceptions about the location. However, recognition and alignment of an employee's job with their personal interests are likely to be the most powerful elements in rural staff retention.

Australia's Best Manufacturing: What is virtual learning, and how can it be used to encourage and retain rural workers?

Kevin Dwyer: Well-designed virtual learning provides a multi-modal approach matching the variety of learning styles

prevalent in organisations. Virtual learning channels include real-time video, recorded video, collaborative learning, information databases, 'how-to' sheets, articles on topics of interest, forums, and instant messaging.

In rural locations, it can be difficult to provide a good training and development environment as most training organisations are based in large-population centres or the capital cities. Even in large organisations with a rural base such as mining or construction companies, other than operational training the major training centres are capital-city based. The travel may take several hours there and back, negatively affecting work–life balance for the employee, and increases cash costs and opportunity costs for the employer.

Virtual learning using modern technologies can provide access to high-quality training without the disruption and cost of travelling to a face-to-face event. Its other advantages include:

- time and place independence



- no travel time to the place of learning
- questions allowed to be asked without waiting for a 'turn'
- all students provided with a voice without the need to fight for 'airtime' as in a face-to-face situation
- answers to questions can be seen and discussed by all
- messages are archived centrally, providing a database of interactions which can be revisited
- debate about topics of interest is encouraged by collaboration tools.

Australia's Best Manufacturing: Are many rural businesses embracing the virtual learning technology?

Kevin Dwyer: It's exciting to see that in Australia, rural TAFE colleges are taking up the provision of video-based training. Businesses such as banks are also taking up a combination of real-time video and the use of instant messaging and online 'rooms'. Some of these are shared privately between the learner and the tutor, while others are open to all. Similarly, the explosion in webinars – both for free and for a fee – demonstrates that many organisations are starting to use the technology.

Australia's Best Manufacturing: Why is workplace diversity important in rural areas?

Kevin Dwyer: Diversity is important in all workplaces, but it can be harder to generate in rural areas. Diversity should be seen not just in cultural backgrounds but also gender, age, thinking styles, management styles, technical versus generalist skills, and frontline versus management positions.

Having a diverse workforce provides a greater range of perspectives, thereby providing a richer base for innovation while also reducing the potential for group-think. In rural communities, the pool of talent tends to be narrower in its range of upbringings, and hence the perspectives of problems and opportunities tend to be narrower. Potentially, this can lead to less innovation and more group-think in rural businesses. Actively seeking diversity in organisations in rural communities allows them to attract from a much wider and deeper talent pool.

Australia's Best Manufacturing: Given the importance of this diversity, how can rural employers encourage it?

Kevin Dwyer: The difficulty in encouraging rural diversity lies primarily with the

judgement of leaders that diversity is not worth investing in. Leaders need to ensure that diversity is valued, and that policies and procedures are implemented for the encouragement of diversity.

A pertinent example of this difficulty is attracting and retaining female engineers to remote mine and construction sites. This requires companies to provide personal development, career development, and compensation specific to females, to trade off against perceived location drawbacks. Virtual learning capability is one way in which employers can provide ongoing training and support, thereby increasing the attractiveness of a rural company.

Rural businesses can also promote diversity through networks of people inside the company working to build communities within the larger community. This helps to ensure that people of different backgrounds or orientations have places to go for support when needed, and to share experiences and learning.

Australia's Best Manufacturing: As we move into the future, will regional diversity develop further?

Kevin Dwyer: Governments at both state and federal levels are increasingly understanding of the need for taking action to develop regional and rural centres. For example, the development of regional and rural-friendly policies to support the mining boom is slowly becoming more customary. National infrastructure projects in both transport and telecommunication will increase access to services in rural areas. In and of themselves, these changed government policies will necessarily increase diversity in the rural workplace. Changes will encourage people to stay in their rural communities rather than moving, and will reduce the perceived trade-off made by many people contemplating moving to rural areas.

Skilled migration from cities, coupled with the local economic attraction of the mining boom, is also reshaping the diversity of some specific rural communities. However, the key to reshaping diversity still lies with the leadership of rural companies. 