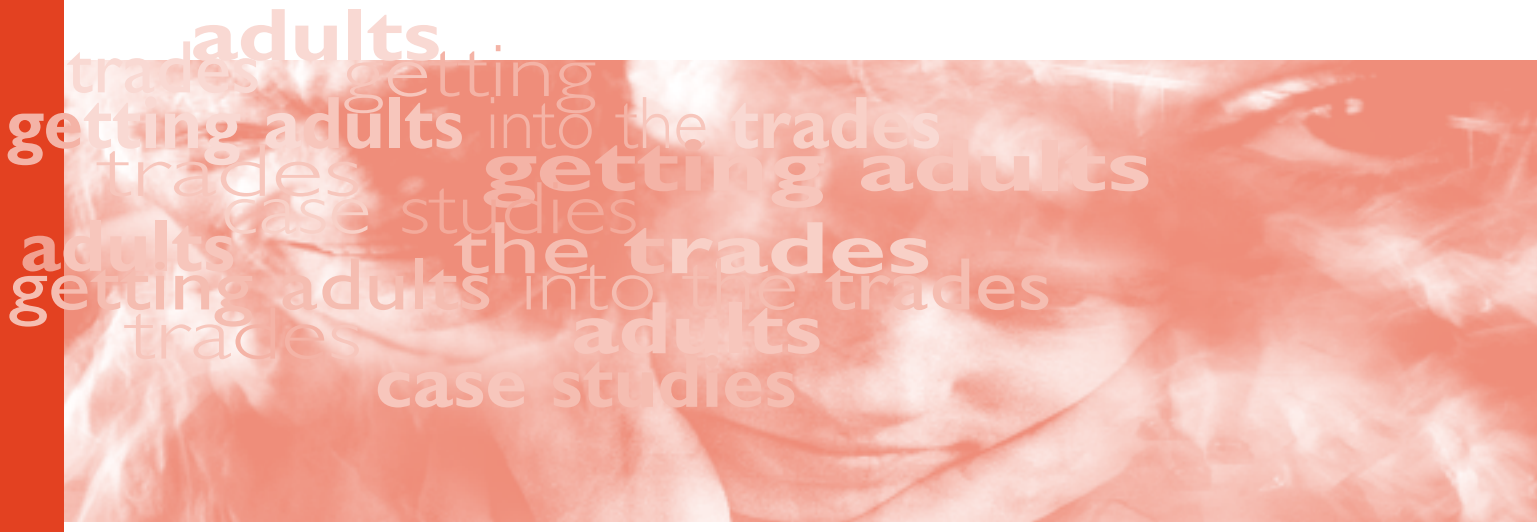
NCVER



Getting adults into the trades

Case studies

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Publisher's note

This is a companion volume to the NCVER report *Getting adults into the trades,* which can be found on NCVER's website www.ncver.edu.au

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Background

With the ageing of the Australian population, changing life career patterns, and continuing supply shortfalls in the 'traditional' trades, school leaver apprenticeships may not be enough to meet most or all demands. Adults are becoming an increasingly important recruitment source.

That is the rationale for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) report *Getting adults into the trades*. The first chapter of that report presents a summary of relevant statistics and research on adults in trades; this is followed by a detailed analysis in the second chapter of employer-based case studies that were conducted in 2001. The final chapter develops concluding themes and strategies for getting adults into the trades.

This is a companion website report, *Getting adults into the trades: Case studies*. It is a reference document containing the full versions of the case studies as they were collected from the 16 firms employing adult apprentices that participated, in all States and the ACT.

The authors would like to thank the training managers, training providers, and adult apprentices of the firms for their kind assistance.

Readers who are interested in the analysis of the case studies and in the concluding themes and strategies should consult the full report *Getting adults into the trades*.

Note: In the case studies, ASCO = Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (1997) and ANZSIC = Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (1993).

Case studies

Adult pathways in automotive (and other) trades: Gough and Gilmour, NSW

Gough and Gilmour Holdings (GGH) is a long-established Australian company. Operating 20 branches across New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), GGH has been an accredited Caterpillar tractor dealer since 1925, specialising in sales and service of earthmoving equipment and heavy truck engines.

Employer training perspective

GGH employs a total workforce approaching 800, two-thirds of which is trade related. The workforce includes 450 (55%) qualified tradespersons and 150 (20%) apprentices. Of the 150 apprentices, two (1%) are females and about ten (7%), including one of the females, are adults. The main trades are heavy vehicle mechanic, heavy plant mechanic and agricultural mechanic (all ASCO 4211), automotive electrician (ASCO 4212), and boilermaker (ASCO 4122).

Selection and training processes

GGH branches recruit the apprentices in accordance with company criteria. Before appointment, all apprentices are tested by an outside agency to ensure they possess the necessary aptitudes and physical health. No special attention is paid to the age of applicants, all appointments being strictly on merit. Careful recruitment ensures that the drop-out rate during apprenticeship is less than 2%, and this is mainly attributable to unforeseen circumstances or accidents. Adult drop-outs are almost unheard of.

Due to a persistent shortage of qualified tradespersons, GGH has employed increasing numbers of apprentices in recent years. There is also a marked turnover in apprentices— approximately 30% of completing juniors leaving the company each year to take up jobs elsewhere. By contrast, virtually all the adult apprentices remain with the company upon completion. Branches located in the Sydney metro area experience a higher turnover of staff than those in regional areas.

Statutory off-the-job training is provided by technical and further education (TAFE). GGH supplements this with about 80 hours a year of specialised GGH in-house training.

Adults (over-25s)

The company would welcome more eligible adults into apprenticeship, but few apply. The reason is thought to be the relatively low rate of pay that adult apprenticeship attracts. The company thoroughly counsels prospective adult apprentices on this before indenturing them. To help them cope with the reduced pay, the company offers unlimited overtime most of the year. 'Adult apprentices look for this, whereas the juniors are not prepared to work a 12-hour day,' said a company spokesperson.

Adults, because of their maturity and commitment, are generally seen as easier to manage and train. They tend to be more productive in the first two years and can be given tasks requiring greater responsibility, particularly if they come with relevant industrial experience. Extra maturity is beneficial to the company's image when apprentices interact with customers in the field, as they commonly need to do. The one disadvantage identified was a tendency for some adults with another trade under their belt to 'think they know it all'.

From the company's perspective, adults offer benefits in terms of greater commitment, fewer disciplinary issues, and better attendance. 'You don't get TAFE phoning up to say an adult apprentice did not turn up—I would never have any problem putting on an adult apprentice,' said a workshop manager. Adults undertake the same training as other apprentices and do not appear to have any difficulty with TAFE, dispelling this manager's fear that they might not be accepted by the younger students.

Apprentice perspective

The Sydney apprentice interviewed for this study was 23 years old, living with a partner in rented accommodation. After Year 12, he undertook a fitting and machining apprenticeship with a regional heavy engineering company. In his fourth year, company downsizing forced him to relocate to a Sydney branch to complete the apprenticeship. To increase his repertoire of skills, he then embarked on a second apprenticeship as an automotive electrician with GGH. He had initially contemplated advanced study in fitting and machining, but decided instead on automotive electrical because, in his view, it 'was more highly skill-based'.

To undertake the second apprenticeship, the apprentice had to accept a 50% reduction in income, but saw the sacrifice as worthwhile: 'I appreciate this [second] opportunity a lot more because it's my future. It's what I'm going to have to use to make money for the rest of my life. Some of my friends have struggled [via TAFE] to get into university. At the same age that they get their qualifications, I will have two trades'. Despite topping the class in his first year of auto electrical, he has elected not to seek a shortened indenture because 'it would have meant missing out on all the job experience'.

Summary

With a total workforce approaching 800 people, Gough and Gilmour Holdings employs 450 (55%) qualified tradespersons and 150 (20%) apprentices—of whom 10 (7%) are adults. Recruitment of apprentices, including assessment of aptitudes and physical health, is conducted at branch level in accordance with company policies. Although all apprentices are appointed strictly on merit, the company does see benefit in adult apprentices. One of these benefits is the very high retention rate of adults in GGH after apprenticeship.

Its workforce being highly trade intensive, GGH has experienced a persistent shortage of qualified tradespersons in recent years and would welcome more adults into apprenticeship. However, few apply, the most likely reason being the low adult apprentice pay rate. Adult apprentices, because of their maturity and reliability, better fit the image the company seeks to promote when interacting with customers in the field. The adult apprentices do not appear to experience any significant difficulties in their training, either on or off the job.

The apprentice interviewed was undertaking a second apprenticeship under his own initiative, being appointed to GGH from outside the company. He hoped completion of a second apprenticeship would enhance his attractiveness to employers and hence his job security and earning ability. A 50% drop in wages upon entering apprenticeship was seen as a worthwhile sacrifice to achieve this goal.

Date of study: Fourth quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in metal and electrical trades: Crane Copper Tube, NSW

Crane Copper Tube (CCT), in Penrith NSW, is a division of Crane Enfield Metals, specialising in the manufacture of copper tube and aluminium extrusions. Commencing operations in 1959, this wholly Australian-owned company supplies copper and aluminium products manufactured to national and international standards to overseas and domestic markets.

Employer training perspective

CCT employs 340 workers at Penrith of whom 40 (12%) are qualified tradespersons and 17 are apprentices (16 male and 1 female). The two main trades are mechanical fitter (ASCO 4112) and electrician (ASCO 4311). Four (25%) of the 17 apprentices are male adults, one in his mid-twenties, two in their thirties, and one in his forties. Due to substantial restructuring, the number of apprenticeships offered by the company in the next two to three years is unlikely to increase. New adult apprenticeships in this period are unlikely to exceed one a year.

Selection and training processes

Until 2000, CCT conducted its own apprentice recruitment. A recruitment agency now does initial selections and gives CCT a short-list for consideration. (CCT does not take part in group training schemes.) Apprentices are moved around various plants for experience. Electrical apprentices spend time with outside contractors, for domestic electrical experience.

The company is moving towards training and employing 'dual-ticketed' tradespersons, qualified in both fitting and electrical trades, with all 13 junior apprentices currently heading down this path. However, the four adult apprentices have elected to qualify in one trade only—a decision supported by the company which does not wish to see the employees, so long out of study and with home and family commitments, over-extend themselves.

CCT envisages more 'maintainer–operators' in the company (and in industry generally) in coming years—employees who operate a machine and also maintain and repair it as tradespersons. The concept is attractive as a means of increasing operating efficiencies. If implemented, it might open up apprenticeship opportunities for adult plant operators.

Adults (over-25s)

The four adult apprentices were employed as trades assistants before embarking on apprenticeships. Apprenticeship was one of several alternatives offered to employees whose jobs were affected by restructuring. There are two apprentice electricians and two mechanical fitters. All are undertaking a full four-year indenture term with no credit sought in off-the-job training. In accordance with their industrial agreement, their wage rates did not drop to the adult apprentice rate upon entering apprenticeship. The two apprentices interviewed would not have been able to take up an apprenticeship had such a drop in wages been applied.

The experience of CCT is that adult apprentices appreciate the opportunity and are highly committed to succeeding. They are role models for younger apprentices in the workplace.

Supervisors in the workshop initially had some difficulty adjusting to adult apprentices—still seeing them as trades assistants rather than first-year apprentices. Some adult apprentices also had to adjust—tending to the view that, as former trades assistants, they 'knew it all'. Once these early misconceptions disappeared, other problems were not encountered.

In offering apprenticeships to these employees, the company took precautions to ensure that they would be able to handle the study involved. Several tests previously used by the company for selecting apprentices were used in this process.

Provider and apprentice perspective

Two apprentices were interviewed. One is 38 years of age and married with children. After finishing Year 10 at school, he completed an apprenticeship as a blacksmith with the navy. He found employment with CCT, first as a production operator and then trades assistant. When his position became redundant, he accepted an electrical apprenticeship.

The second apprentice, an early school leaver, is 28 years and married with one child. After various jobs, he began applying regularly for work with CCT, finally landing a production worker job. After six months he became a trades assistant and was offered an apprenticeship as a mechanical fitter when his position became redundant. Now both in their third year, these employees are pleased with their apprenticeships, as illustrated by the comment: 'Just when I thought it was too late, this opportunity came up. I have never looked back since'.

Both apprentices had picked up a variety of non-trade vocational qualifications in their pre-apprenticeship careers, mostly while working with CCT. These included: occupational health and safety (OH&S), working in confined spaces, various crane tickets, elevator work platform, forklift operator, and senior first-aider. Although most qualifications could not be credited towards the trade qualification, they contributed to the value of these employees to the company.

Both apprentices noted that, although their TAFE training was the same as that of junior apprentices, teachers respected their maturity, allowing them to work under less supervision and seek help at their discretion. This could be a disadvantage when teachers incorrectly assumed they possessed particular knowledge or experience. The fitting apprentice commented that his age and work experience gave him confidence to speak up and seek help from others when he needed it—something he was never able to do when younger.

From the TAFE perspective, adult apprentices are very good students. As well as being a steadying influence on their class, some were able to convey to younger students the value of apprenticeship, saying how much they appreciated the chance to pick up the opportunity lost earlier in their lives. Perhaps understandably, junior apprentices were more inclined to heed this sort of message from a fellow apprentice than from a teacher.

In the opinion of a TAFE spokesperson (electrical trades), the need to find employment to match training available from the institute was one of the most significant blockages to adult apprenticeship. Adults regularly approached the institute seeking trade courses only to be informed that, without workplace experience, the study would be of little value. A government bureau or other agency to help adults find suitable employers was suggested. The relatively low rate of pay for adult apprenticeship was also seen as an impediment.

Summary

Crane Copper Tube employs 340 people including 40 tradespersons and 17 apprentices. Four of the apprentices are over 25, all employed as trades assistants before apprenticeship. Their work backgrounds include various vocational competencies complementing the chosen trade.

All the adult apprentices perceived their apprenticeships as valuable career progressions. CCT confirmed that apprentices were appreciative of the opportunity, and highly committed to succeeding. Adults acted as role models for the younger apprentices in the workplace. Before inducting the adults into apprenticeship, CCT interviewed and tested them to ensure they would not run into difficulties with their off-the-job training.

The TAFE institute echoed employer comments regarding commitment of the adults and their beneficial influence on younger apprentices. The institute identified two blockages to apprenticeship of adults: the difficulty in finding employers willing to take on an adult apprentice, and the financial disincentive arising from the drop in wages.

Date of study: Fourth quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in the metal and electrical trades: A Victorian auto components supplier

This company mainly operates in the industry class Automotive Electrical and Instrument Manufacturing (ANZSIC 2813), designing and producing essential auto electric components. The company employs some 2000 people, including about 260 (13%) tradespersons or apprentices in metal and electrical trades.

Employer training perspective

The training manager directs all apprentice training. The company is a registered training organisation (RTO) conducting basic off-the-job training itself for apprentices. It is also working with Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), a 'dual-sector' university and VET institution, to develop further study pathways (diploma and above) for the better apprentices.

There are currently about 200 qualified tradespersons and nearly 60 apprentices with the company. Most (46) apprentices are in mechanical trades (ASCO 411) with the remainder (13) in electrical trades (ASCO 431).

Selection and training processes

The company tests prospective recruits on basic maths and communication skills to establish their behavioural competencies. Most of the successful applicants are male school-leavers with Year 11–12 qualifications. Some adults (over-25s or younger adults), not normally existing company employees, may also be taken on.

Under the present company model, apprentices go through about 80–85% of a 'standard' apprenticeship as it might flow from the Metals or Electrotechnology Training Packages. There is some mixing of basic mechanical and electrical competencies, supplemented by extra project and office work to capture useful competencies in computer-aided design, industrial engineering, maintenance methods, or in specific technologies (for example, diode manufacture).

The company monitors apprentices closely in terms of their application of competencies, feedback from customers, individual assessments and marks, and successful progression through apprenticeship to jobs inside or outside the company.

Generally, apprentices are not accelerated through the standard competencies or the apprentice wage levels. Rather, the incentive is to achieve higher results and a more impressive resume on completion of the four-year term.

Training innovations and blockages

The company is little concerned with the roles of new apprenticeships centres and employer incentives, but sees the present training packages and competency parameters as limiting. It proposes to introduce a more diverse 'mechatronics' training model attuned to the company's manufacturing prospects and skill development needs.

Metals and electrotechnology, and other, elements are to be combined in a new program to produce all-round tradespersons capable of improving company technologies and progressing to higher levels. RMIT may assist in developing these post-trade and technological skills.

The company sees barriers to technology-driven training innovation in poor government support for post-basic (diploma and degree) training, little provision of infrastructure or equipment to companies, and poor incentives for would-be industry trainers in companies. Specifically, it urges government scholarship support for industry experts to undertake graduate studies, to skill them as expert trade and technology teachers for industry.

Adults (over-25s)

About five of the 60 apprentices are over 25 (8% of total), a little less than the over-25s national average share in metal-electrical trades, but another 30 are in their early 20s. The company reports about 95–100% completion rate with all apprentices. The emphasis on post-trade career and study opportunities is a strong incentive for completion, also a particular incentive for would-be adult apprentices.

The company expects that adult apprentices may gain general market share over the next couple of years, but if anything lose in their share of company apprenticeships. This is partly because the mechatronics model will target younger apprentices, also due to higher costs for the company and low apprentice wages for adults.

Over-25s receive the same mix of theoretical training, project work and assessment as under-25 apprentices. The company finds that adult apprentices may have clear direction, but this may not be complemented by a sound work ethic.

Provider and apprentice perspective

As its own RTO, the company is taking the opportunity to test training models (mechatronics) that merge the boundaries of training packages and look more to post-trade careers and opportunities for promising recruits. It could be said that curriculum development, trainer professionalism, and infrastructure support feature more strongly in the company's ideal model than they do in the Australian apprenticeship funding model.

RMIT, which is working with the company on further study pathways post-trade, makes the point that able adult apprentices could also be developed into TAFE teachers in the trades.

Adult apprentices surveyed see a number of benefits in being with the company. They appreciate the career and earnings opportunities on offer. One or two comment that prior university education has not given them the start they needed, with the mature-age apprenticeship now offering a valuable chance to get lives and careers back on track.

Summary

The company is a high-technology enterprise with an established training ethos and a particular interest in post-trade and technology-driven training for apprentices. About five (8%) of its 60 metal-electrical apprentices are over 25, with another 30 in the 21–25 bracket.

The company mainly recruits school leavers with Year 11–12 for apprenticeships, with a few in the over-25 age group. It is a little below the national averages in terms of adult (over-25) apprentices, but well above average in terms of (all-age) completions.

Over-25 apprentices may lose slightly in their share of places as the company moves to the integrated 'mechatronics' training model and increasingly targets Year 11–12 school leavers. However, if adult apprentices are 'second-chance' university graduates, the mechatronics model and the involvement of RMIT in post-trade pathways may draw them in.

The company illustrates the issues that may occur if an employer wants to offer a technology-driven training model with more diverse learning and career opportunities within and beyond the trade. It proposes that better infrastructure and industry-trainer support from government is needed in order to develop that kind of model.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in the trades: Melbourne East Group Training, Melbourne

Melbourne East Group Training (MEGT) is headquartered at Ringwood in suburban Melbourne and has another dozen sub-offices around Melbourne. It operates a large group training scheme (the subject of this report) for a variety of trades, also other employment and training services including a registered training organisation and a new apprenticeships centre.

Employer (scheme) training perspective

Training of apprentices is managed by MEGT training and field staff. Various Melbourne TAFE colleges, depending on the trade, serve as RTOs for MEGT off-the-job training. MEGT has about 720 apprentices and trainees, including 400 apprentices. They fall into groups of 50 (metals), 62 (auto), 90 (electrical), and 200 (construction). The 'metals' group includes fitters (ASCO 4112), refrigeration mechanics (ASCO 4312) and printers (ASCO 4912).

MEGT accepts approaches from prospective host employers and apprentices in the trades generally, and may advertise apprentice vacancies on its website. These might include (examples from October 2001) an advertisement on behalf of a Melbourne firm seeking a first-year stainless steel fabrication apprentice, or another seeking out-of-trade electrical apprentices to be re-employed by MEGT directly and made available to host employers.

Adults (over-25s)

Of the current group of 400 apprentices, 23 (6%) are over 21. There are three in metals, three in auto, five in electrical and 12 in construction. Nine (2%) of the 400 are over 25, below the over-25s national average share in trades generally. MEGT estimates a 75% completion rate for its (over-25) apprentices. The number of apprentices, and over-25 apprentices, is expected to remain much the same over the next couple of years.

MEGT comments that the system works well for the over-25s, in areas where they are allowed to progress more quickly. Adult apprentices have the advantage of maturity and are 'more appreciative' of the efforts made on their behalf.

Only MEGT's adult metals and auto apprentices, not electrical and construction, automatically go on to an adult rate. Where there is an adult award, this may make it harder for MEGT to re-place the apprentices when they need to change hosts. Conversely, where no adult wage is prescribed, this may make it harder for the apprentices to survive on the applicable wage, especially in the first year of training. While an adult rate in all awards might, in theory, increase adult participation, it would not suit the operations of MEGT.

Summary

MEGT is a large group training scheme servicing metal, auto, electrical and building trades in the Melbourne area. It has about 400 apprentices, 23 (6%) over 21 and nine (2%) over 25.

MEGT expects that its (adult) apprentice numbers will be maintained over the next couple of years. Adults' maturity and attitude is an asset. Areas with adult awards (metals and auto) may tend to suit apprentices if they can find an initial host employer, but the higher rates may make it harder for MEGT to rotate apprentices to other host employers.

Date of study: Fourth quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in aero trades: Flight West, Queensland

This Queensland-based company operates in the industry class Scheduled Domestic Air Transport (ANZSIC 6402), as a commuter airline around Queensland regional ports.

The company employs over 250 people. Across all ports served, this includes 60 (24%) tradespersons or apprentices in aircraft mechanics and avionics(1).

Employer training perspective

The training manager directs all apprentice training. Aviation Training for Aviation Engineers (ATAE), a training company servicing general aviation employers in Queensland, conducts all the off-the-job training.

Flight West employs 45 licensed aircraft maintenance engineers (LAME) (ASCO 4114). There are 15 apprentices, or 33% of the LAME pool. Of these 15, 12 are in aircraft mechanics and the remainder in 'avionics' or aircraft systems.

Selection and training processes

The company does not conduct an active recruitment process, receiving about 80 resumes a year from its listing in the Queensland Department of Education annual 'Employment avenues'.

Prospective recruits sit a science and aviation entrance exam and after further interview about five candidates (four in mechanical and one avionics) are offered apprenticeships each year.

Some of the successful applicants enter direct from Year 12, but the company actually prefers graduates from pre-vocational programs (including ATAE). Adults, not existing company employees, are occasionally taken on. The Queensland Apprenticeships Centre serves as the new apprenticeships centre for the company and its apprentices.

Apprentices go through 'traditional' training pathways as prescribed in the National Aeroskills Training Package. ATAE provides the off-the-job training in blocks of 2x5 weeks over three years. Aviation trades are rated as certificate IV qualifications (many trades are certificate III) on the basis of the high skills and safety requirements. Apprentices are not accelerated through the standard competencies or apprentice wage levels, but may receive some credit up-front for pre-vocational studies or prior learning.

Adults (over-25s)

Three of the 15 Flight West apprentices are over 25 (20% of total), more than the over-25s national average share in metal–electrical trades, and another six are in their early 20s. Relying on its good reputation and exhaustive apprentice screening, the company reports about 100% completion rate for all apprentices.

1 Employment and training numbers since affected by the Ansett Airlines collapse

Flight West expects that adults may gain a higher market share of aircraft maintenance apprenticeships over the next couple of years, and similarly within the company. One factor is that increasing numbers of Year 12s with strong maths/physics/English, after entering university or TAFE, may seek new careers for themselves after finding those pathways unsuitable.

Company and ATAE policy is that over-25s receive the same kind of training as their younger colleagues. The traditional pathways are seen to offer the best all-round training for all apprentices.

Provider and apprentice perspective

ATAE was established about three years ago when Southbank TAFE in Brisbane withdrew from aviation training. It is based at Archerfield near Brisbane, but also provides pre-apprenticeships in Cairns in partnership with Tropical North Queensland TAFE and Cairns Region Group Training.

The ATAE apprentice base has grown from about a dozen to about 80, including the 15 Flight West apprentices, and it also conducts two or three pre-apprentice (certificate II) classes each year. Fourteen of the current ATAE apprentices and pre-apprentices are over 25. The positive features of the over-25s group are stronger commitment and motivation, mature outlook and stabilising effect on younger classmates, and (generally) previous trade experience and good attention to maintenance details.

As noted, the Flight West adult apprentices are often disillusioned university or TAFE students. Aircraft maintenance is a prestigious trade option for such students. They may envisage that they can pick up their previous courses post-trade. In fact, the company reports that two previous apprentices have continued on through university to become professional aeronautical engineers.

Summary

Flight West is highly reliant on its skilled workforce of LAMEs and apprentices, who represent a quarter of total company employment. Three (20%) of its 15 aircraft apprentices are over 25, with another six in the 21–25 age bracket.

The company mainly recruits pre-vocational graduates, or school-leavers, with good Year 12 results as apprentices, with a few in the over-25 age group. All adult apprentices complete training, and the company expects that their numbers may climb over the next couple of years.

The off-the-job provider, ATAE, notes a number of positives with older apprentices from Flight West and in the industry generally. These include motivation, maturity, stabilising effect on young colleagues, previous experience, and (highly desirable) an attention to maintenance detail. Often, the older Flight West apprentices have left unsatisfying university or TAFE studies and turned to aircraft maintenance as a prestigious trade option.

A traditional apprenticeship pathway is the norm for older and younger apprentices. Off-the-job training is provided on five-week periods of block release.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in the building trades: Building Industry Group Apprenticeships, Brisbane

Based in suburban Brisbane, Building Industry Group Apprenticeships (BIGA) operates a large group training scheme across all major building trades on behalf of the local industry. BIGA itself employs about 80 people, about one staff per seven apprentices or trainees.

BIGA's Construction Division is usually the legal employer of the apprentices and trainees, numbering well over 550, who work on rotations with local building firms that serve as the 'host employers' for the scheme.

Employer (scheme) training perspective

Training of apprentices is managed by BIGA training and field officers and by the training manager of the associated Academy of Building and Construction. The academy serves as the registered training organisation for all BIGA off-the-job training.

Currently, BIGA has 548 apprentices and 23 trainees. Over 50% (290) of the apprentices are in carpentry and joinery (ASCO 4411). All major building trades (ASCO 44) are represented, plus associated trades in cabinetmaking and electrical. Apart from carpentry and joinery, the main apprentice groups are cabinetmaking (66), painting (53), bricklaying (41), wall and floor tiling (38), fibrous and solid plastering (33), plumbing (16) and electrical trades (10).

Selection processes

Apprentices can come to BIGA following participation in VET-in-Schools programs, through direct entry to the industry via an apprenticeship (preferably following a pre-vocational program), or as an 'out-of-trade' apprentice.

Currently, pre-vocational graduates or successful school-based apprentices are the preferred recruits for BIGA apprenticeships. Likely apprentices may be recommended to or assessed by training officers at BIGA, which tests literacy and numeracy standards of all candidates.

Training intermediaries and incentives

Commonwealth (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs) employer incentives usually flow directly to BIGA as the legal employer. The Queensland Government's Building and Construction Industry Training Fund is also accessed for incentive funding.

As it is compulsory, the new apprenticeship centres (NACs) are used for their duly appointed Commonwealth and State apprenticeship administrative functions. BIGA comments that it could equally carry out these NAC functions for itself.

Training arrangements

BIGA endorses the competency-based approach to apprenticeship training, but also supports a set time component. Most of its apprentices do close to a four-year term. To suit industry needs, off-the-job training is conducted over short periods rather than on block release. On-the-job projects reinforce the theory of particular competencies or modules.

While on their job rotations, apprentices are visited quarterly by BIGA field officers. The visits allow for discussion of training and employment issues, employer ratings of apprentices and BIGA and, conversely, apprentice ratings of on- and off-the-job training.

The scheme is a strong supporter of VET-in-Schools programs. Year 11 students can do a pre-vocational program one day a week. Successful pre-vocational students can then undertake school-based apprenticeships in Year 12, with one day a week for training and one day a week at work. School apprentices continue on full-time after Year 12, usually for three more years.

Adults (over-25s)

Of the current group of 548 apprentices, 42 are over 25 (8% of total, close to the over-25s national average share in building trades). Anecdotally, BIGA estimates a 50% completion rate for its over-25 apprentices, but a similar estimate applies to BIGA apprentices generally.

While their younger counterparts may be single or still living at home, the adult apprentices may have family or financial responsibilities that make it very difficult to survive on the applicable wages.

BIGA expects that its apprentice aggregate may increase over the next couple of years with a pickup after an industry downturn. However, it also expects that the over-25 apprentices may lose industry share and their share of BIGA apprenticeships.

While adult apprentices may have the advantage of maturity, the cost of adult wages is perceived to be too high for the market. It is difficult to sell employers adult apprentices with limited skills (that is, pre-vocational skills) and at much higher (from the employer's perspective) wages. BIGA comments that some form of government wage subsidy might be applied to offset the extra wage payable to adults.

Provider and apprentice perspective

The academy neither encourages nor refuses adults (over-21s or over-25s) who wish to take up pre-vocational courses, the preferred route into a BIGA apprenticeship. 'The reality,' comments the Academy, 'is that they are less inclined to gain employment due to the higher cost to employers'.

Although some adult apprentices may have industry skills indicating RPL as an option, the academy does not usually find age a good indicator of individual training needs or learning capacities. That is not to deny the 'life skills' and leadership capacities of older apprentices.

The academy reports that adult apprentices come from all backgrounds, including professionals, ex-labourers, and unemployed people. Were they to seek apprenticeship with individual employers, the potential employer could be younger than the would-be apprentice, potentially creating friction, but this is not such an issue for a group scheme.

Summary

BIGA is a large group training scheme servicing all major trades in the Brisbane building industry. Forty-two (8%) of its 548 building apprentices are over 25.

BIGA prefers to recruit school leavers who have undertaken pre-vocational courses or school-based apprenticeships for its apprenticeship intakes, but does not rule out over-25s, especially if they are prepared to undertake pre-vocational courses. The scheme is about on par with the national construction trade averages in terms of adult (over-25) apprentices, but below average in terms of (all-age) completions.

BIGA is not optimistic that over-25s will maintain their share of places in the scheme over the next couple of years. While their maturity is an asset, they do not usually offer increased learning potential compared to younger recruits, and the required adult wage is a strong disincentive to employers. High adult wages, comments BIGA, could be offset by some form of government wage subsidy. Also, the scheme could assume the NAC role for itself.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in metal and electrical trades: Hamersley Iron, WA

A major world producer in Iron Ore Mining (ANZSCI 1311), Hamersley Iron produces 52 million tons annually in the Pilbara of Western Australia. Most business being conducted in remote inland locations, many employees live in mining towns near mine sites. Remoteness and 'company town' social structures present special problems in apprentice training.

Employer training perspective

Hamersley employs more than 2200 people, including about 850 qualified tradespersons and 109 apprentices. As an 'all staff' company, Hamersley does not classify employee occupations by trade, as would be the case under an award. Rather than being classified as a 'fitter' or 'electrician', a trade employee would be referred to as a 'maintainer'. In broad terms, the trade employees fall into two major groups: mechanical engineering (ASCO 411)—about 700 employees—and electrical and electronics tradespersons (ASCO 431)—about 150.

Selection and training processes

Hamersley has a 30-year tradition of employing adults as apprentices. Of the current 109 apprentices, five (5%) are adults. Up until now, all adult apprentices have been recruited from existing employees, to extend company skill resources and foster individual careers. As apprentices, these adults retain normal salaries and benefits, and the company retains their positions. TAFE has been the off-the-job training provider for the adult apprentices, but this may shift to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in WA (CCIWA) in future.

About 1995, Hamersley stopped recruiting its own junior apprentices and contracted CCIWA to manage apprentice recruitment and training programs. For all its juniors, Hamersley now acts as a host employer for the CCIWA group training scheme, with CCIWA providing their statutory off-the-job training. About 25% of all CCIWA apprentices work for Hamersley.

In its 2002 apprenticeship policy, Hamersley has asked CCIWA for an adult (particularly females) recruitment strategy. The perception is that many female spouses (and other family members) in mining towns would like to work, but are unable to do so because there are few enterprises and job opportunities. If family members can find work, more families may be influenced to stay on in town, increasing stability in the workforce and town community.

Adults (over-25s)

Hamersley supports the concept of adult apprenticeship. There are a number of advantages in drawing adult apprentices from staff:

- ✧ Company profiling shows adult apprentices are a lower risk group from an OH&S standpoint, an important consideration in the mining industry.
- ✧ Adult apprentices drawn from employee ranks are already acquainted with the company culture, standards of behaviour and safety systems.
- ✧ With previous company experience, existing employees have good prospects of completing training in shorter time and reducing their terms of indenture.
- ✧ The company already has a good picture of the prospective apprentice, whose attributes can be verified by supervising personnel and from employee records.

In the words of a company spokesperson, they (adults) are 'ready to roll'. With their greater stability and maturity, adults in an apprentice intake can positively influence safety and performance in the group as a whole. Offers of apprenticeship may extend to adults who are not company employees, including, as noted above, spouses and other family members.

Hamersley expects a worsening shortage of skilled labour in industry over the next few years. This will create an urgent need for accelerated training, which could operate to the advantage of adults seeking training through apprenticeships. With their greater maturity, focus, and industrial experience, adults should be able to complete their training more quickly.

Thus, the proportion of adults in apprenticeship with Hamersley may increase over the next few years. However, unless there is more funding for apprenticeships, growth in total numbers is unlikely. Any increase in adult numbers is likely to result in fewer juniors.

From Hamersley's perspective, the only significant blockage to adult apprenticeship is the drop in pay, as might apply to adults forgoing full-pay jobs to be apprenticed by CCIWA and work at Hamersley. This is not an issue for Hamersley employees, who retain their previous salary as apprentices, or for unemployed mining town residents who take up apprenticeships.

Provider and apprentice perspective

The apprentice interviewed was 31 years of age and married with two children. He began with Hamersley in 1986 as a trained boilermaker. After moving into the fitting section, he took the opportunity to obtain formal fitting qualifications through apprenticeship. With his experience, he received credit for all stage 1 training and part of stage 2. His term of indenture was reduced by about 15 months, and he completed his apprenticeship in 2001.

The apprentice did not notice major differences in treatment in his workplace or TAFE training. TAFE teachers tended to let him 'do things his way', on the understanding that he would seek advice where necessary. On some occasions, teachers would pair younger 'problem' students with him, using him as a role model and steadying influence.

TAFE training for adults is essentially the same as for juniors. TAFE confirmed the apprentice's view that (some) adults could set a positive example for juniors, raising class standards by participation in learning activities. Adults with industrial experience often completed two-week blocks of training ahead of schedule, returning to work a few days early.

The trainer noted that, having adopted stringent drug policies to satisfy OH&S obligations, some companies find that a significant proportion of apprentices struggle to pass a drug test. Adults, who may be less likely to offend, become a more attractive apprentice proposition.

Summary

Hamersley Iron, a major world iron-ore producer, employs more than 2200 people. Nearly half (850 qualified tradespersons and over 100 apprentices) are in metal and electrical trade categories. Training is fairly traditional in nature, although adults can shorten their terms significantly. Up until now, TAFE has trained the adult apprentices and CCIWA the juniors.

Five apprentices, all previously company employees, are adults. All junior apprentices are employed under the CCIWA group training scheme, Hamersley acting as a host employer. Most Hamersley employees and their families live in remote mining towns near mine sites. One recruitment strategy under consideration is to offer adult apprenticeships to (female) spouses, thus providing them with welcome employment opportunities.

Recruitment and off-job training of Hamersley's junior apprentices is undertaken by CCIWA. Adult apprentice training is also likely to shift from TAFE to CCIWA, as the latter takes over recruitment of adult apprentices for Hamersley. Both Hamersley and the TAFE provider see adults as offering benefits of maturity and stability and, if they come with some industrial background, the ability to complete training and their indentures in shorter time than juniors. With evident shortages of skilled labour expected to become acute over the next few years, these attributes could operate to the advantage of prospective adult apprentices.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in metal and electrical trades: Wesfarmers CSBP, WA

Wesfarmers CSBP, a division of Wesfarmers in Western Australia, is the major supplier of fertilisers and chemicals (Basic Chemical Manufacturing, ANZSIC 253) to Western Australia's

agricultural, mining and industrial sectors. CSBP operates a large fertiliser and chemicals complex at Kwinana, south of Perth, and other facilities at the regional WA ports of Bunbury, Albany and Esperance.

Employer training perspective

Of the 570 employees at CSBP, about 40 are qualified tradespersons, mainly mechanical fitters (ASCO 4112) and electricians (ASCO 4311). Many of these are 'dual-ticketed', or qualified in two trades. There are nine apprentices, one an adult completing stage two of training. Over the past 18 months, four other adults have completed apprenticeships.

Selection and training processes

CSBP junior apprentices are group training scheme employees of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia (CCIWA), with CSBP acting as host employer. The five adult apprentices were employees of CSBP before, and during, their apprenticeships.

Following outsourcing of apprenticeships to CCIWA, it now provides all off-the-job training for CSBP junior apprentices. However, both TAFE and CCIWA have provided off-the-job training for the five adult apprentices.

Having dried up the pool of suitable employees from which to draw adult apprentices, the company does not expect to appoint any more in the immediate future.

Adults (over-25s)

Two of the five adult apprentices were instrument mechanics, offered apprenticeships to enable them to qualify as A-grade electricians and so become 'dual-ticketed' employees. The other three were trades assistants apprenticed as mechanical fitters. During training, all remained on the adult wage they had received before apprenticeship.

Both CSBP and the adult apprentices commented on difficulties encountered in putting adult apprenticeships into practice. For example, there was uncertainty about which stage of the apprenticeship should be the starting point, and some training was repeated because of misunderstandings. To CSBP there appeared to be a lot of 'red tape'. The company and the apprentices would like to see clearly documented procedures for implementing adult apprenticeships. Despite these reservations, CSBP regards adult apprenticeship as an important tool for addressing a growing shortage of qualified tradespersons in industry.

CSBP sees adult apprenticeship as a valuable avenue of career development for employees. The company gains greater flexibility, either through multi-skilling or simply by increasing the number of qualified personnel in a work area. The maturity and experience of adults allows them to be given training tasks requiring care and responsibility, attributes that make them attractive apprenticeship propositions. The only noteworthy disadvantage is that adults can be 'set in their ways' and therefore resistant to learning new ways of doing things.

Provider and apprentice perspective

Two apprentices were interviewed for this study. One, 37 years of age, was married with two young children, and the other 40 years, married with three children. Both were CSBP employees for some years before being apprenticed as mechanical fitters. Neither had any major vocational qualifications although, between them, they had accumulated certificates in rigging, scaffolding, forklift operation, crane driving and fibre-glassing. Both had moved through various CSBP jobs to the point where they were working as trade assistants to fitters.

TAFE provided most off-the-job training, with some additional training and on-the-job assessment from CCIWA. Both apprentices completed most of their off-job training over a period of about three years before entering apprenticeship. The apprenticeship, which lasted about one year, served to formalise their achievements. Both were somewhat disheartened by the drawn-out nature of the process they followed to reach their goal.

Responsibility for determining their off-job training requirements and then enrolling in appropriate modules of study rested largely with the apprentices themselves. CSBP allowed them to take time off work to attend college (on a day-release basis) with the expectation they would make up lost time where possible. Upon successful completion of each module of study, the company reimbursed the apprentices for their study costs. Both apprentices were satisfied with the treatment they received from the training providers, TAFE and CCIWA.

TAFE teachers looked favourably on the presence of adults in their courses. Adult apprentices, they said, exerted a positive influence on other class members through their contributions and behaviour in class. Some teachers said they used adult apprentices as mentors to other students. Where practicable, teachers modified their teaching to take account of the ability of some adults to progress faster than juniors. Conversely, there were also adults who needed discreet assistance to compensate for poor literacy and numeracy arising from schooling inadequacies in earlier years.

The TAFE provider was optimistic about the prospects for adult apprenticeship. A major industry training council was said to be considering trades assistants and other mature-aged people in the workforce as a means of alleviating skill shortages expected over the next few years. Adults who, because of their industry experience, possessed potential for accelerated learning and shortened indenture periods were favourably placed to benefit from such a scheme.

Summary

Wesfarmers CSBP, a WA manufacturer of fertilisers and chemicals, employs almost 600 people including 40 tradespersons and nine apprentices. Of five adults who have trained as apprentices, four have completed their apprenticeships over the past 18 months and one is still in training. All of the adult apprentices were CSBP employees, two using apprenticeship to obtain a second trade qualification and three upgrading their skills from trade assistant. In the latter group, two mentioned the lengthy process (four years in total) to upgrade.

CSBP and the TAFE training provider believe apprenticeship of adults, particularly those with industry experience, could play a significant role in alleviating projected shortages in skilled labour over the next few years. In such circumstances, adults with industrial experience are well-placed to benefit from apprenticeship opportunities arising. However, CSBP itself has exhausted its current pool of suitable employees for adult apprenticeships.

For companies and individuals to reap maximum benefit from adult apprenticeships, CSBP and its adult apprentices believe that the provisions for adult apprenticeships must be well-publicised and the implementation procedures clearly stated.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in electrical trades: Westpower Services, WA

Employing 2600 people, Western Power operates in Electricity Supply (ANZSIC 3610) as the major generator of electrical energy in Western Australia, its four major power stations and 31 smaller stations representing almost 60% of WA generation capacity. Westpower Services, a

branch of Western Power, is responsible for construction and maintenance of the high-voltage power network across WA.

Employer training perspective

Westpower employs about 300 people, 60 (20%) of whom are qualified in trades associated with high-voltage transmission. Many of these tradespersons are 'dual-ticketed'; that is, qualified in two trades. These dual trades include electrical lines trades, cable jointing (both ASCO 4313) and general electricians (ASCO 4311). In addition to those qualified in trades, Westpower employs 21 apprentices, of whom seven (33%) are adults.

Selection and training processes

In the past, the Chamber of Commerce of Western Australia (CCIWA) and various TAFE colleges provided off-job training for Westpower apprentices. CCIWA is now the sole provider. Westpower and CCIWA select apprentices through aptitude testing and interview. Students attend CCIWA periodically for two-week blocks of training. The training format is similar for adult and junior apprentices.

Westpower encourages apprentices to seek recognition of current competencies and, for those who have performed satisfactorily, to apply for a reduction in the term of indenture. Should the apprentices want an early sign-off, the company will lodge applications on their behalf. Reductions of six months are typical, reducing the term to three-and-one-half years. While these reductions may have special relevance for adult apprentices, they also apply to juniors.

Adults (over-25s)

Of its seven adult apprentices, Westpower previously employed five in another capacity; two as boilermakers and three as trades assistants. They accepted apprenticeships as an alternative to redundancy brought about by restructuring. All five are pleased with the outcome. One, a 58-year-old, reportedly said it was 'the best thing he ever did'.

The remaining two adult apprentices were taken on via the CCIWA group training scheme as part of Westpower's normal yearly intakes. On average, Westpower takes about four new apprentices a year, one usually being an adult. With extra adults taken on to stave off redundancies, the number of adult apprentices in training has grown over the past three years. Usually, about four (or 20%) of the total number of apprentices would be adults.

Ages of adult apprentices working at Westpower range from early 20s to late 50s. The success rate for all Westpower apprentices is virtually 100%. With greater acceptance of the adult apprentice concept, Westpower believes that their proportions across the industry have steadily increased over the past five years, but that the industry (and company) trend has now levelled out. By contrast, CCIWA expects the proportion of adults in apprenticeship to continue to grow moderately over the next few years.

Although Westpower does not see adults to offer major advantages over carefully selected juniors, they note importance differences. Adult apprentices often come with prior industrial experience, including workplace knowledge and familiarity with OH&S matters. This maturity shows up in greater caution and care—an asset for work dealing with high voltage electricity. However, they tend to be slower in their work—most noticeable for apprentices in their 50s. Adults are more likely to question procedures and other aspects of their jobs, but this usefully prompts review and improvement of practices.

Low wages are seen as the main blockage to adult apprenticeship. With greater demands on their income than juniors, adults struggle to live on the lower pay of apprentices. Strategies to counter this problem include: granting of special overtime or country work at a higher rate; (if existing

employees) remaining on the previous wage; taking on additional casual work (the apprentice interviewed below still did some sound engineering work); and, the apprentice's spouse becoming a significant wage earner during the apprenticeship.

Provider and apprentice perspective

CCIWA notes that adults tend to have clearer goals and motivations than juniors, and can be relied on more to complete set work. These attributes could be, but have not been, used to expedite training. This will change as training delivery in electrical technology is reformed over the next three years—using training packages, modules, competency-based learning, and greater emphasis on training in the workplace. Adult apprentices, with their greater motivation and prior experience, should be able to move more quickly through training and reduce their apprenticeship terms.

The training provider finds that adults 'blend' very well into the training environment. They are an asset in class, their experience enabling them to generate and contribute to productive class discussions, and their maturity having a beneficial influence on younger class members.

The second-year apprentice interviewed for this study was one of the two (see above) not previously employed by Westpower. He is with the CCIWA scheme but is expected to complete his entire apprenticeship working at the Westpower plant, training as an electrical fitter specialising in high-voltage equipment.

This apprentice is 25, partnered and purchasing a house, and previously had casual employment as a sound engineer. After undertaking a pre-apprenticeship course with TAFE, he secured the apprenticeship with CCIWA. His primary motives for the apprenticeship are to obtain a qualification and steady employment.

The apprentice has not noticed any special treatment by the employer or training provider. He attributes any minor differences that occur to differences in ability and attitude rather than age, pointing out that similar minor differences in treatment are also observable between junior apprentices. One minor negative was the tendency of some TAFE teachers (in his pre-apprenticeship) to 'treat him like a 17-year-old' rather than an as adult.

Summary

Westpower Services, a branch of Western Power, looks after the high-voltage transmission network across WA. It is skill and trade intensive, the workforce of 300 including 60 qualified tradespersons and 21 apprentices. The adult share of company training is higher than the national average, seven (33%) of the 21 apprentices being adults ranging in age from early-20s to late-50s. Of these, five were previously employees of the company.

The training provider, CCIWA, sees some further prospects for growth in adult apprenticeships. Low adult apprentice wages are a barrier, but adults already employed may retain their previous company wage as apprentices. Westpower observes that adult apprentices, with their maturity and industry experience, tend to be more careful and questioning, valued traits in a dangerous and highly regulated industry.

CCIWA does not make special concessions for adult apprentices, although their maturity and experience can be beneficial in class. Some adults (and juniors) get minor concessions in the apprenticeship term. The industry's shift to training packages, modules, competency-based learning and workplace training should enable adults to complete their training more quickly.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in the electrical and metal trades: Electrolux, Adelaide

Electrolux is an international corporation employing about 90 000 workers globally and 1500 in Adelaide. It is the largest world producer of kitchen, cleaning and outdoor use appliances.

Australian operations were previously owned by the Email company. Adelaide is now the main Australian Electrolux operation, with two plants in Household Appliance Manufacturing (ANZSIC 2851), manufacturing white goods and plastics. These include washing machines, dishwashers, range-hoods, stoves, appliance motors, and plastic products. About 1000 employees are at the washing plant and the remainder at the cooking plant. This includes over 50 (3% of total) tradespersons or apprentices in metal and electrical trades.

Employer training perspective

Electrolux employs apprentices in the electrical (ASCO 43), mechanical (ASCO 41), and toolmaking trades (ASCO 4113). The washing plant employs apprentices from all three areas, the cooking plant the first two only. All apprentices are trained to become maintenance trades people, responsible for providing services around the clock. There are 18 apprentices, all currently drawn from company pre-vocational courses and established company workers.

Selection and training processes

Various pathways can be followed in acquiring an apprenticeship with Electrolux. These include VET-in-Schools programs, pre-vocational courses, traineeships, work in engineering-related areas, and upgrade by existing production workers and trades assistants.

From 2001, all apprentices are employed and trained by Engineering Employers of South Australia Group Training Scheme (EASSAGTS) and back-hired by Electrolux, whose training officer manages internal rotations. EASSAGTS interviews and tests (mechanical ability, problem-solving, mathematics, and literacy) all prospective apprentices. EASSAGTS is continuing the company policy of preferring non-school leavers or more experienced workers.

Up until 2001, the training of apprentices was administered by Email Training Services. Apprenticeship cohorts consisted of adults from production areas transferring to apprenticeships, adults employed at adult apprentice rates, and younger apprentices on junior rates. A competency-based training system has allowed apprentices to progress at their own speed through seven pre-determined pay scales. In some cases, a second-year student might be paid the same as a fourth-year student.

Electrolux apprentices are employed under the federal Metal Trades Award. 'Adult' pay scales apply to apprentices 21 years or over, 'junior' to 15–21. EASSAGTS has continued company policy of having a mix and match of apprentices on different pay scales for the first year, but it remains to be seen whether it will follow this policy, and that of the competency-based pay scales, as new apprentices come on board.

Adults and junior apprentices are trained similarly. Theirs is a traditional apprenticeship, with workplace assessment as the major means of assessing on-the-job competencies. Any competencies that cannot be delivered on the job are acquired at other venues.

The off-the-job training is co-ordinated by EASSAGTS. Apprentices attend induction sessions with EASSAGTS, for up to three months, before they are enrolled off the job at Regency TAFE or Nastec Solutions. EASSAGTS will also assess and credit apprentices for prior learning. Apprentices will also complete their probationary period, before joining the company. On the first day, they receive a company welcome and site tour.

Second-year apprentices acquire competencies on the job as well as attending off-the-job training for vocationally specific training. After 24 weeks, they will have completed all or 90% of their off-the-job training, both academic requirements and practical skills training.

During the last 20 months of contract, apprentices will complete off-the-job training, honing skills learnt during the first two years and in some cases engaging in more advanced learning. By the end of the fourth year, they are ready to become well-qualified tradespeople.

The company favours fast-tracking apprentices through off-the-job training if they have completed the appropriate modules, or have evidence of relevant skills. Thus, it is not age that differentiates apprentices but rather prior experience and knowledge. Recognition of learning and competence is especially important for adult apprentices.

Adults (over 25s)

Of the 18 apprentices, eight (44% of total) are over 25 and another six are aged 21–25. The company reports 100% completion rate with adult apprentices, whose numbers are expected to remain stable or increase given company policy favouring existing workers as apprentices.

Electrolux has a preference for mature and committed applicants, especially those who have completed prevocational courses. These can be fast-tracked through basic training and concentrate on more advanced areas, related to business needs, and leading to post-trade certificates. Workplace supervisors interviewed generally favour the adult apprentices.

With EASSAGTS, the company policy of preferring non-school leavers is likely to continue. The company benefits from having older apprentices who need a job and are more likely complete their trades and stay on.

Apprentice perspective

Five apprentices aged 28–33 were interviewed. All had Year 11 or 12. Three had worked in various jobs and then done pre-vocational courses leading into the Electrolux apprenticeship, two were company employees upgrading. One of these two noted, as a significant factor in his decision to switch to an apprenticeship, that he was able to keep his production-line wage.

The group wanted to learn skills that would prepare them for a better career future or steady them in their family responsibilities. Some reported an abiding interest in, or aptitude for, the trade, which they could now act on as a 'second chance'. The three who had come via the pre-vocational route said they responded to the company's advertised pitch for maturity and experience. All were satisfied, speaking favourably of the company's supportive attitude, the responsibility they were given, and the extra skills and opportunities being acquired.

Summary

Electrolux is a company with an established training ethos, which actually favours adult recruitment in the traditional trades, over 40% of the 18 apprentices being over 25. Under the new training provider EASSAGTS, adults are likely to hold their share of apprenticeships.

A variety of pathways—VET-in-Schools programs, pre-vocational courses, related traineeships, and working in engineering-related areas—can be a precursor to a company apprenticeship. Existing production workers and trades assistants may also become apprentices, and these are the source of many apprentices aged over 25.

Over-25s pursue similar training, with the advantage of fast-tracking (of wages and qualifications) in recognition of prior learning and competencies. With EASSAGTS now the provider rather than the employer, there is a concern that fast-tracking may be reduced.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in the printing trades: Griffin Press, Adelaide

Griffin Press in Adelaide is the book manufacturing division of PMP Communications, a national publisher based in Melbourne. It operates in the industry class Book and Other Publishing (ANZSIC 2423).

The company employs about 160 people, this figure including an adjustment to convert casual employee hours into full-time equivalents. The figure includes about 45 (28% of total) tradespersons, trainees and apprentices in printing machining and binding and finishing. Nearly all trainees and apprentices are over 21 and drawn from existing workers.

Employer training perspective

The company has a fairly traditional approach to apprentice training, with all off-the-job training and workplace assessment being undertaken by Adelaide's Douglas Mawson Institute of TAFE (usually on block release).

Griffin employs 21 qualified printing tradespersons, eight printing machinists (ASCO 4912) and 13 binders and finishers (ASCO 4913). There are 15 apprentices and eight trainees, 23 in total. Of the 23, 13 are in printing machining and the remainder in binding and finishing.

Selection and training processes

Rather than recruiting externally, the company selects nearly all apprentices and trainees from its existing workers. Typically, these are casual company employees who move directly into apprenticeships, or into traineeships for one year and then to apprenticeships. The company interviews and tests its prospective apprentices for necessary aptitudes.

Casual employment makes sense in an industry with sharply fluctuating workloads. When a seasoned casual has a proven work history, both the company and the employee are well-placed to assess whether that person is a suitable apprenticeship prospect. Mid-1980s graphic arts award changes started this company trend toward using adult casuals and then turning them into apprentices (but see below for more recent award changes). A number of current managers and supervisors are themselves former adult apprentices with the company.

Apprentices are employed under the Graphic Arts—General—Award, which prescribes different rates for adults compared with 15–21-year-olds. Unlike adult apprentices, junior apprentices under 17 cannot be asked to work the presses between 9pm and 7am. Although extra shift pay can help compensate adults for the drop in pay upon entering an apprenticeship, these adults identify shift work as one of the (few) disadvantages of the adult apprenticeship.

Usually having similar work and company backgrounds, adult and junior apprentices undertake similar training programs. Although innovative and non-trade training pathways are not uncommon in the printing industry, this particular company follows a fairly traditional four-year pattern in which workplace training is complemented by off-the-job training (block release) in TAFE. With their greater experience and commitment, the adult apprentices are perceived to have slightly faster learning rates on average. An adult might complete a ten-day TAFE training block in seven or eight days and return to work early.

Adults (over-25s)

Of the 23 apprentices and trainees, 18 are over 21 and about half of these (40% of total) are over 25, considerably more than the over-25s national average share in printing trades. The company reports about 90% completion rate for both adult (over 21) and junior apprentices.

Company policy is that over-25s receive similar training to their younger colleagues. Traditional pathways are seen to offer good all-round training for all apprentices.

It is feared that the adult, and the over-25, shares of Griffin apprenticeships may fall over the next couple of years. Recent award changes stipulate that any casuals who go beyond 12 weeks must be given permanent employment if they are to remain on the payroll, although the casual period can be extended (once) for a further 12 weeks if the employee agrees.

This award ruling will lead to higher turnover of company casuals and tend to reduce the pool of seasoned casuals available for apprenticeship selection. To retain some of its training flexibility, Griffin could adopt an alternative strategy of back-hiring casuals from a labour-hire company, but this would entail higher costs.

Provider and apprentice perspective

The training provider, Douglas Mawson TAFE, believes that the conventional apprenticeship system can work well for adults. Adult apprentices have usually been out of the learning environment for a while, and TAFE usually tries to place adults with other adults who can lend classroom support. In computer-based pre-press trades, especially, adults may also suffer a learning disadvantage if they are not as computer-literate as the younger apprentices. Adults could suffer a significant drop in income on entering apprenticeship, although this could be alleviated to some extent by over-award payments.

Where (as is often the case with Griffin) apprentices have previously spent more than 12 weeks with the company, TAFE points out that their employer is no longer eligible for a 90% State Government subsidy for training materials and other expenses, previously made available under the SA 'user choice unit price list'. For a 770-hour program, Griffin would in such a case pay $7700 rather than $770. This change can be expected to depress adult printing apprenticeship numbers.

Three apprentices or trainees aged 21 through 40 were interviewed. All had been casuals with the company, although none had started out with the intention of taking up an apprenticeship.

The adults disliked the drop in pay with apprenticeship and the shift-work requirements, but all were positive about their prospects and expected to complete training. While the return to formal training could be a 'culture shock', TAFE was generally supportive. Both the employer and TAFE offered older apprentices something of a leadership role because of their greater maturity.

Summary

Griffin Press depends on its workforce of printing tradespersons, apprentices and trainees, who represent a quarter of company employment. About nine (40%) of its 23 apprentices and trainees are over 25, implying five to six apprentices over 25, with another nine apprentices and trainees in the 21–25 age bracket. A traditional apprenticeship pathway is the norm for older and younger apprentices.

The company mainly recruits its printing apprentices and trainees from established casual employees who have shown a liking and aptitude for the work. Adult apprentices dislike the pay drop and the shift-work requirements, but nearly all can expect to complete training.

The company and its training provider fear that adult training numbers may fall over the next couple of years. The main factors are an award change forcing casual employees (who want to stay on) onto the permanent payroll after 12 weeks, and the removal of a substantial State Government materials subsidy if apprentices have previously been employed with the company more than 12 weeks.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in the automotive trades: MTA Group Training, SA

MTA Group Training Scheme (MGA–GTS) is a training organisation operated by the Motor Trade Association (MTA) of South Australia. Employing a total of 329 apprentices and 18 trainees, it serves about 180 host companies across SA. In addition to its apprentices and trainees, MTA–GTS employs a small number of accredited trainers and administrative staff.

Employer (scheme) training perspective

MTA–GTS apprenticeships extend across five automotive trades: motor mechanics (ASCO 4211), automotive electricians (ASCO 4212), panel beaters (ASCO 4213), vehicle painters (ASCO 4214), and vehicle body makers (ASCO 4215). There are also apprentices in the non-trade category of automotive parts interpreter (ASCO 6212–13). Because of low demand, there are no apprentices currently in vehicle trimming (ASCO 4216).

For this study, five SA host employers have been consulted: Andrew Craddock Marine, Australian Motors, City Holden, Formula Honda and Paradise Motors. In each case, those interviewed were the personnel manager, the (sole) adult apprentice and the apprentice supervisor. Their responses are incorporated in this case study.

Selection and training processes

MTA–GTS recruits mainly through advertisements in the press, via direct approaches from potential applicants, or by referral from host employers. All applicants, whether juniors or adults, are assessed by means of interview combined with aptitude and ability tests.

Successful applicants initially undertake ten weeks of training with MTA–GTS, completing, in effect, stage one of training. They are then placed with host employers to complete the remainder of their on and off-the-job training. Apprentices are rotated through several employers to broaden experience, although it is not uncommon to spend most of the apprenticeship with one employer. In the past, stages two and three of off-the-job training have been provided by a TAFE institute. As from 2001, MTA–GTS provides these stages. Where it is advantageous, some assessments may be conducted in the workplace by MTA–GTS trainers.

Apprentices are employed under the Vehicle Industry—Repair, Services and Retail Award. This award provides higher wage rates for adult apprentices, with the difference tapering off in the latter years. At the time of writing, adult rates were higher by 82%, 48%, 13%, and 1% for the first, second, third and fourth years respectively. MTA–GTS pays all apprentices the specified award rates. None of the apprentices receives over-award payments, one reason for this being that host employers are billed for the wages paid.

Adults (over-25s)

Of the 329 apprentices, 12 (4%) are adults, below the national adult average for auto trades. MTA–GTS estimates completion rates at about 95% for both adult and junior apprentices. One reason for adult apprentices not completing is pressure of family and financial commitments.

While MTA–GTS views increased adult participation as desirable, it does not expect much increase. The main employer disincentive identified is a recent increase in the margin of adult apprentice wages over junior wages. The five host employers do not expect much change across industry, although two anticipate changes within their own companies. One expects an increase due to the company's good experience with adult apprentices, the other a decrease because younger apprentices are 'more adaptable' to company requirements.

From the MTA–GTS perspective, adult apprentices exert a steadying influence on juniors' behaviour in training and in the workplace. On the debit side, some tend to be fixed in their ways compared with juniors, this being difficult to detect in the selection process. Host employers frequently rate adult apprentices as displaying greater maturity, dependability, responsibility, stability, and commitment than juniors. The negative aspects are the higher wages, lower ability to cope with new technology (such as computers) and, once again, the potential to be fixed in their ways. Employers, however, were careful to point out that these were generalisations that could be outweighed by individual differences unrelated to age.

A significant barrier to adults undertaking an apprenticeship is the drop in wages compared with their accustomed adult rates. Employers and adult apprentices, alike, see this as the biggest disincentive to acceptance of apprenticeship by adults. Although MTA–GTS feels that the higher adult rates might dampen employer enthusiasm for adult apprentices in the future, host employers do not rate this as a significant factor.

Provider and apprentice perspective

Training for apprentices employed by MTA–GTS follows a traditional block-release pattern in which apprentices are released from the workplace for set periods of time to undertake training with an external training provider. In the past, the initial ten-week block of training was with MTA–GTS and subsequent blocks (typically two weeks) with TAFE. MTA–GTS now provides all training. MTA–GTS host employers and apprentices believe that this training model and the underpinning apprenticeship system work satisfactorily for adult apprentices.

Of the five apprentices interviewed, four are males, ranging from 21 to 37 years of age at commencement of apprenticeship. Three are married with children, a difficult factor when trying to manage on the adult apprentice wage. The female adult apprentice, who is single, was aged 23 on beginning the apprenticeship. Reasons for pursuing adult apprenticeship include the qualification, interest in the work, desire to work in a managerial capacity, and plans for eventual self-employment.

All but one of the apprentices is certain of completing apprenticeship, the exception being a married apprentice experiencing financial difficulties with the low pay. These difficulties had already caused him to discontinue his apprenticeship once, to take up a higher paying job.

The female apprentice, moving to WA shortly after interview to take up the third year of her indenture, reported that her third-year WA pay was less than her second-year SA pay.

Summary

MTA–GTS is a group training organisation providing apprentices and training services to employers in the automotive retailing and repair industry. Although only a small proportion of its automotive apprentices (12 of 329, or 4%) are adults, their experiences and those of host employers suggest that the existing system of apprenticeship generally serves adults well.

Neither adult apprentices nor employers see any special provisions in work or training as being necessary. Employers generally regard the greater maturity, responsibility and commitment of adults as outweighing any age-related inflexibilities and the extra costs of apprenticing adults.

The significant blockage to the pursuit of apprenticeship by adults is the lower wage that they have to accept. This is especially hard on apprentices supporting a family. One apprentice, however, reports that corresponding WA rates are lower than those applying in SA.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in the auto trades: Elwick Road Bodyworks, Hobart

Elwick Road Bodyworks is a motor body repair company (ANZSIC 5323, Smash Repairing) at Glenorchy, in the near suburbs of Hobart, Tasmania. In repairing motor bodies, the company employs tradespersons in panel beating (ASCO 4213) and vehicle painting (ASCO 4214).

Employer training perspective

The company employs seven people. This includes three qualified panel beaters (one of whom had recently completed an adult apprenticeship) and two apprentice vehicle painters (one adult and one junior).

Selection and training processes

In all, the company has employed three adult apprentices. Before their apprenticeship, two of these were employed for some years in an unqualified capacity—one as a panel beater, the other as a vehicle painter. The panel beater had been with the company 19 years before taking up an apprenticeship. A third adult apprentice was appointed from outside the company, but was released in the first year when personal circumstances led to unsatisfactory work performance. The currently employed junior apprentice joined the company after making contact through his school's work experience program.

Company training for apprentices follows a traditional pattern, with off-the-job training provided by Devonport campus of TAFE Tasmania. The adult panel-beating apprentice received substantial credit in his training, reducing the apprenticeship term from four years to about six months. Both the company and the apprentice reported that TAFE was very helpful in advising of options and procedures, and subsequently facilitating the RPL process. The adult vehicle-painting apprentice is also expecting to receive substantial credits.

Adults (over-25s)

Elwick Road Bodyworks is strongly supportive of the adult apprenticeship concept—particularly as a means of enabling experienced workers to gain a qualification. Apart from the benefits in work quality arising from a fully trained workforce, the company points to business benefits, such as the enhanced image and prestige projected by a fully qualified staff.

Although there is no immediate demand for further apprentices, the company's experience would lead it to consider adult apprentices in the future. In particular, the company would look for candidates with prior experience in the trade.

The issue of reduced wages during apprenticeship never arose for the two adult apprentices who remained with the company. As experienced employees, and treated as qualified tradesmen for all practical purposes, they remained on their existing adult wages.

Provider and apprentice perspective

The adult apprentice interviewed for this study was 39 years of age, married with a family and working in the trade for more than 20 years. Throughout his career, his goal had been to work as

a qualified tradesman in motor body repairs. Reading difficulties had prevented him from gaining apprenticeship in his earlier years. An attempt at recognition through tradesmen's rights certification (1991) proved too involved and difficult a process. The opportunity to undertake an adult apprenticeship and obtain recognition of competencies gained in the industry finally enabled him to qualify fully as a tradesman.

As a student at TAFE, the apprentice felt like the 'odd one out' because of his age. He did not interact much with other (junior) students, feeling that they 'did not want to learn'. The TAFE teachers treated him well, respecting his background and the knowledge he brought.

Devonport TAFE confirmed that there were no significant difficulties in teaching this adult student. The self-paced learning the college offered was well-suited to the needs of the student, enabling him to cover the areas of training needed in a short time. The student was said to be exceptional in already possessing nearly all of the competencies needed for qualification. Adult apprentices are rare, only two or three having passed through the panel beating and vehicle painting section of the college in recent years.

Summary

Elwick Road Bodyworks is a typical motor body repair company in the town of Glenorchy, Tasmania. Of seven people employed, three are qualified tradespersons and two are apprentices. One of the three tradespersons, a panel beater, had only recently completed an apprenticeship and was the adult apprentice subject of this case study. Another apprentice, a vehicle painter, was also an adult.

Both these adults had worked for the company as unqualified tradesmen before apprenticeship. In the case of the panel beater interviewed, this amounted to 19 years—a factor enabling him to complete apprentice training in approximately six months.

The company was strongly supportive of adult apprenticeship and indicated it would have no hesitation in hiring adult apprentices in the future—with the proviso that they should be adults with some past experience in the trade. The company has been prepared to keep adult apprentices on their previous company wages.

From the perspectives of the apprentice and the training provider, the apprenticeship system appeared to work well for persons entering apprenticeship as adults—at least for those with past trade experience.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in electrical trades: ActewAGL, ACT

ActewAGL, the joint venture ACT electricity and gas supply company, employs about 900 people, about 800 with Actew in Electricity Supply (ANZSIC 3610). Actew employs about 250 trades workers (31% of workforce) in electrical-electrical distribution trades (ASCO 4311–13).

Employer training perspective

The work practices manager directs apprentice training. There are currently 38 apprentices (15% of total trades workforce), including two women, 34 in electrical and four in electrical distribution. Two of the electrical apprentices transferred across from electrical distribution.

Applicants to the advertised annual intake undertake an aptitude test administered by the local Utilities ITAB. About 25 are interviewed and eight to ten are finally taken on. Generally, successful applicants are males in their teens or possibly early 20s with Year 10–12.

Employer incentives do not greatly influence recruitment decisions, the critical factors being business needs. The ITAB plays a useful role in recruitment and induction, and one of the two ACT new apprenticeships centres assists in the administrative aspects.

Actew apprentices are employed under an enterprise bargaining agreement, but with close reference to relevant electrical awards. Pay rates are an issue, lines apprentice rates being markedly above those for electrical apprentices. This anomaly evens out once apprentices complete training. Qualified tradespersons can earn between $30 000 and $45 000, and access higher company positions with further training. The work practices manager himself is a former (non-Actew) electrical contractor.

Apprentices go through a conventional four-year apprenticeship with one day off a week for training at the Canberra Institute of Technology, Bruce Campus. On the job, apprentices are rotated through different departments, such as metering and communications. One valued feature in the training package is the suggested hours for different technical competencies. Monitoring against these ensures a breadth of training and competencies.

Actew has had satisfactory apprentices who have been through ACT VET-in-Schools programs. Other 'alternative pathways' are not common but, for example, lines tradespersons who transfer across to electrical would receive some recognition for current competencies.

Adults (over-25s)

Only two apprentices (about 5% of total) currently are over 25, but a larger number would be in their early-20s. The company reports nearly 100% completion rate with all apprentices. A few more adult apprentices can be expected from time to time.

Summary

About 30% (250) of the Actew workforce of 800 are in electrical or electrical distribution trades, and about 15% (38) of these are apprentices. Only two in the current apprentice group are over 25. The company mainly recruits school leavers, with a few recruits in their older teens or early-20s. Actew lines tradespersons may transfer across to electrical apprenticeships.

Actew is below the national electrical trades averages in terms of adult (over-25) apprentices, but above in terms of (all-age) completions. Being able to attract good quality apprentices with its broader training and career paths, the company does not appear to be under great pressure to recruit apprentices in older age brackets. The existing, standard apprentice rates would not be that attractive to older (over-25) recruits.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in building trades: ACT Master Builders' Association Group Training

ACT Master Builders' Association (MBA) operates, among other services for 800 members, one of the oldest group training schemes in Australia. The scheme responds to the nature of the ACT industry, dominated by smaller contractors who struggle to carry a full-time apprentice.

MBA Group Training ACT (Inc.) employs apprentices in the building trades. Apprentices work day-to-day with MBA members in the ACT, the 'host employers'.

Employer (scheme) training perspective

Training of apprentices is directed by the group training and skills centre managers. MBA is a registered training organisation (RTO) using its skills centre for all off-the-job training.

There are currently about 100 apprentices, including one woman. Most are in carpentry and joinery (ASCO 4411), with most other major building trades (plasterers, roofers, tilers, painters and plumbers) represented except bricklaying. MBA is also the 'user choice', off-the-job training provider of choice for other apprentices employed outside the group scheme.

Selection processes

An annual intake is advertised, and the field is narrowed down to an intake of about 20, based largely on commitment and aptitude displayed at personal interview. Most of the successful applicants are males in their teens or possibly 20s with Year 10–12 qualifications.

Training intermediaries and incentives

The employer incentives flow directly to the scheme as the legal employer, and are an important factor in the economics of the scheme, including charge-out rates to employers. Unlike other employers, the scheme is not eligible for the same kind of 'completion' payment that individual employers still receive. The local ITAB (Construction Training Australia) plays a supporting role and new apprenticeships centres assist in the administrative aspects.

Industrial relations

Apprentices are employed under relevant ACT building awards, with host employers paying wages only for the time that apprentices actually work with them. The scheme always remains responsible for superannuation and other on-costs of employment.

Apprentice pay rates are quite low in the first year rising to about $30 000 or more on completion of trade. There is little variation from set rates, although some scheme apprentices may 'sign off' early and thereby earn full trade rates inside four years. As an RTO, the scheme can take full responsibility for assessing its apprentices' completion.

Training arrangements

Apprentices go through a four-year apprenticeship (this can reduce to about three years with early sign-off) with blocks of about one week in five spent at the skills centre for off-the-job training. Within the one-week blocks, older or more skilled apprentices can be assessed as competent (or above average) early in the week and thereby return directly to their employers.

While training on the job, apprentices are reassigned at fairly regular intervals to different host employers. An ideal rotation might be three months, but apprentices can stay for longer or shorter periods depending on work available in the industry or success with an employer.

The scheme is a supporter of school-based apprenticeships, currently about 12 of 100. School apprentices spend 3x4 weeks with employers, in Years 11 or 12 of the ACT college system. They complete a certificate II and complete the rest of the apprenticeship after leaving school.

The training package has a nominal span of over 800 hours for construction apprentices, but this can reduce to 600 hours-plus with early sign-off. The scheme may top up apprentices' business skills after completion of trade, as this aspect is not covered fully in the package.

Adults (over-25s)

About ten apprentices are over 25 (10% of total, about par with the over-25s national average share in building trades), with some more in their early-20s. The scheme reports about 95% completion rate with all apprentices.

Adult apprentices are expected to maintain their proportional share of the scheme. Low first-year apprentice wages are a disincentive for adults, who may make significant personal sacrifices to train. The rules for employer incentives are also an issue, as the scheme will not attract these for over-25s if they already possess (as is not unlikely) a certificate III qualification.

Adult apprentices can, however, look to a security of employment that they could not always find with smaller employers. On site, they are valued as mentors for younger apprentices.

Provider and apprentice perspective

Both the group scheme and skills centre managers are ex-TAFE employees. The skills centre adapts the training package into 15 informal modules (for example, Basic, Formwork and Timber Framing) which are taught on block, or sometimes day, release. The centre operates in a low-cost informal setting, bringing in industry to provide materials and realistic training exercises. The manager emphasises teaching skills and pastoral care in bringing the training package to life. He believes that adult apprentices can be attracted through marketing and a flexible, not overly academic, training environment. Adult apprentices could receive better support, possibly including extra employer incentives or personal income support to bridge income gaps.

Typically, over-25 apprentices are builders' labourers. They may suffer temporary wage reductions while in apprenticeship, perhaps offset by more rapid progression to third- and fourth-year rates and early sign-off. The apprentice interviewed commended the hands-on training and expected good wage and career prospects on completion. He regarded the trade apprenticeship as a significant broadening and deepening of his previous skills.

Summary

ACT MBA is a long-established group training scheme with an established training ethos servicing member builders in the ACT. About 10 (10%) of its 100 apprentices are over 25.

The scheme mainly recruits school leavers in its annual intake of about 20, with a few in the over-25 age group. The scheme is on par with the national construction trade averages in terms of adult (over-25) apprentices, but above-average in terms of (all-age) completions.

Over-25s can expect to at least maintain their share of places in the scheme over the next couple of years. Standard first-year apprentice rates are not attractive to older (over-25) recruits. This is offset by steady employment, flexibility of training, and prospects for faster progression to completion. The scheme illustrates positive employer–RTO attitudes and guidance, and flexible training and teaching, as signposts to success with adult apprentices.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001

Adult pathways in the electrical trades: ACT Electro Group

Electro Group Training provides a group training scheme for electrical companies in the ACT and New South Wales. The rationale for the scheme is that employers are freed of administrative burdens and can gain access to more broadly trained apprentices 'on demand'.

The group's ACT Office services ACT and southern NSW. It is the formal employer of about 75 electrical apprentices. Electrical trade apprentices (about 50) work day-to-day with small, medium (10–20 employees) and larger (over 20) electrical contractors in the ACT, who serve as the 'host employers' for the group apprenticeships. All the lines apprentices (25) work day-to-day in Goulburn for regional energy company Great Southern (now Country) Energy.

Employer (scheme) training perspective

The operations manager directs apprentice training, assisted by field and training staff. The group uses Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) for training of electrical apprentices and its own Goulburn Skills Centre for lines training.

The group carries about 75 electrical apprentices, including three women. About 50 are apprentice electricians (ASCO 4311) and the remainder apprentice linespersons (ASCO 4313). Numbers should be steady over the next two to three years, perhaps up slightly for linespersons.

Selection processes

The group does not advertise an annual intake, relying on its reputation to generate approaches from employers and individuals. Prospective apprentices are tested for technical aptitudes by the local Utilities ITAB and interviewed for suitability. This generates an ongoing pool of suitable applicants that the group can draw on from time to time in response to fresh employer demands. Successful applicants are usually males with Year 11–12 schooling, a fair proportion being over 21.

Training intermediaries and incentives

The DETYA employer incentives flow directly to the group as the legal employer, and are an important factor in its economics, influencing charge-out rates to employers. The group, however, is not eligible for the 'completion' incentive that individual employers still receive.

The local Utilities ITAB plays a supporting role in screening applicants. ACT new apprenticeships centres (NACs) assist in the sign-up and other administration, but are not seen to add major value. The group monitors its apprentices far more intensively than would a NAC or registered training organisation.

Industrial relations

Apprentices are employed under relevant ACT electrical awards, or sometimes under enterprise agreements, host employers paying wages only for the time that apprentices actually work with them. The group always remains responsible for on-costs of employment.

Award pay rates are quite low in the first year, less so for lines apprentices, and rising to about $30 000 or more on completion of trade. There is no adult (over-21) rate as such, although older apprentices may occasionally start out at the second- or third-year rate.

Importantly for prospective adult apprentices, the interplay of awards, agreements, and straight-out overtime offers quite good apprentice earning prospects for those adults who might be discouraged by standard award rates. A number of the electrical apprentices might be earning, with overtime, well over the award rate. The downside is that they may endure long hours of fairly repetitive tasks, to the detriment of broad skills acquisition.

Training arrangements

The electrical apprentices go through a four-year apprenticeship (early sign-off is not encouraged) with one day in five spent at the Canberra Institute of Technology for off-the-job training.

Quality of off-the-job training is an issue. While training on the job, apprentices are reassigned about four to ten times to different host employers. The group sometimes needs to push the hosts to release valued apprentices, in the interests of broadening their training.

The group participated in a recent ACT trial of school-based electrical apprenticeships, and has also made use of technical support traineeships that can lead into the trade. However, these initiatives have had limited impact on the mainstream training model offered under the Electrotechnology Training Package. A possible innovation, which might suit adults, would be to offer prospective apprentices a limited (three-month) period of upfront formal training.

NSW regional energy companies have outsourced training—Electro Group in the case of Country Energy. Lines apprentices do a four-year apprenticeship, training on block release at the group's skills centre. There seems to be more flexibility for acceleration of training and sign-off than with the electrical apprentices.

Over-25s

About a dozen of the group's apprentices are over 25 (16% of total, slightly higher than the over-25s national average share in electrical trades), with another 20 electrical apprentices in their early-20s. The group reports about a 95% or more completion rate with all apprentices, adult apprentices doing at least as well. Should apprentices fail to complete, quality of teaching or inability to cope with training are often implicated.

The group continues to encourage adult apprentices, as electrical trades are expanding in breadth and complexity (perhaps half of the work now available is low-voltage communications) and mature attitudes to safety are always a priority. Adults can be expected to maintain or increase their proportional share of the group's activity.

Training is fairly similar for the over-25s and other apprentices. Low first-year apprentice wages could a disincentive for adults, but there are some prospects of higher rewards via enterprise agreements and through overtime.

Summary

ACT Electro Group services ACT electrical contractors and a regional NSW energy company. About 16% of its current apprentice group of 75 are over 25, and over 40% are over 21.

The group does not have an annual intake, but maintains a pool of prospective apprentices by testing interested individuals who make approaches. It matches the national electrical trades averages in terms of adult (over-25) apprentices, and is well above the averages in terms of (all-age) completions.

Adults and over-25s, who are encouraged for occupational and safety reasons, are expected to hold or increase their share of apprentice places over the next couple of years. The standard first-year apprentice rates may not be particularly attractive to older (over-25) recruits. However, additional wages can be earned through applicable enterprise agreements and by doing overtime.

Date of study: Third quarter, 2001