

UTILITA WATER SOLUTIONS – CONTINUING TO LEARN ON, OFF & IN THE FIELD

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KEYWORDS

Indigenous

Engagement

Diversity

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since forming in 2016, Utilita has sought to develop meaningful ways to increase Indigenous participation within our business. In early 2020 Utilita commenced an initiative with the coach of the Ipswich Jets, Kieron Lander. The initial intent was to provide employment opportunities for young Indigenous people from remote indigenous communities, however the objectives evolved into an opportunity to provide more wholistic support in the transition to life in South East Queensland, and to develop our cultural awareness from the life experiences of Indigenous people. The small scale program has paved the way for a broader strategy focused on diversity overall.

INTRODUCTION

Utilita Water Solutions is an unincorporated joint venture between Downer Utilities and Ventia. Utilita provides maintenance services to Urban Utilities in Brisbane and Ipswich. The Utilita workforce consists of approximately 200 people, with a primarily male field workforce and a small number of Indigenous employees.

Since forming the Joint Venture in 2016 Utilita has continually sought to develop meaningful ways to increase Indigenous participation within our business. In early 2020 Utilita developed a pilot program with the coach of the Ipswich Jets, Kieron Lander. The initial objectives of the program were to provide employment opportunities for young Indigenous rugby league players who have been recruited from remote indigenous communities, however it quickly evolved into an opportunity to provide more wholistic support in the transition to life in South East Queensland.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Starting on a small scale has allowed us to build connection with our new workers.
- Having the mentor in Kieron has created a shared culture of accountability.
- The accountability and discipline has helped to set the players up for success in the workplace.
- The collaboration has provided Utilita with a cultural guide.
- A broader diversity initiative is now in development as a result.

METHODOLOGY

The initiative commenced with an informal set of guiding principles focused beyond providing employment and modelled on a philosophy of learning and growing for all parties:

- Developing skills through training and on the job exposure, to provide professional development and personal growth, and ultimately a sustainable career path for new industry participants.
- Supporting the transition from living in a remote community to life in the city.
- Providing a mechanism for enhanced cultural awareness outside of structured learning programs offered by Utilita's parent companies.
- Having a collaborative approach to providing wholistic support for individuals as they adjust to life away from their community, including:
 - Tailored onboarding that includes provision of a buddy with similar interests in sport or cultural background.
 - Regular check-ins to ensure the individual feels confident in the workplace and all required support provided from the wider group.
 - An out of work mentor in Kieron as Coach, to provide culturally specific support and to encourage accountability and discipline both on and off the field.

Our first two Jets commenced in early 2020, having relocated from Doomadgee and Lockhart River in Far North Queensland.

Our onboarding approach includes a partner or 'buddy' system but in this case we were selected about who we partnered our new employees with, to support their transition into our team – either through a shared interest or in one instance where we had an employee with experience working in a remote community.

We started the initiative on a small scale but it has provided an opportunity to build connection. Getting to know our new team members closely has helped to understand their needs, the impact of being a long way from home, their connection to their communities, and the importance of their extended families as well as the politics and expectations from family.

The collaboration with the Jets Coach, Kieron, has created an informal partnership. It has allowed us to provide wholistic support as he has been a mentor for us to guide these young men in the workplace and to help grow our organisational cultural awareness. He has also provided cultural guidance for Utilita, advising us when it is appropriate to step forward and when to hold back.

RESULTS

With COVID limiting the time spent 'on the field' with the Jets in 2020, our team members have been able to focus developing skills 'in the field' at work. We have recently recruited two new team members through our association with the Jets, and our first two recruits have now stepped up and are taking a more active role in training and leadership of our new team members.

The initiative with the Jets has also provided an opportunity to look at broader strategy focused on diversity overall, with the partnership providing us an opportunity to become involved with the Jets netball club. Our vision with this partnership is to start to create awareness of opportunities in the water industry and to promote non-traditional careers for females, including opportunities for trades.

CONCLUSION

The initiative has not only provided employment and wholistic support for its participants, but has met our original objectives of creating opportunities to forge a meaningful career path in our industry, and to provide learning opportunities about the experiences of Indigenous Australians.

Most importantly, the initiative has provided a platform to leverage off to promote opportunities for females in the water industry, with the benefit of increased diversity in our industry overall.