

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION FROM THE NORTHERN
TERRITORY**

**NATIONAL FORUM ON THE SKILLS SHORTAGE IN LOCAL
GOVERNMENT**

A NORTHERN TERRITORY PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

This paper deals with issues of importance that relate to skills shortages within local government in the Northern Territory. It is divided into four parts including some background about local government in the Northern Territory, factors that contribute to skills shortages and initiatives to tackle them as well as some suggestions for what could be done at the national level.

The Makeup of Local Government in the Northern Territory

There are a 63 'local governing bodies' in the Northern Territory which are eligible for the purposes of the *Local Government Financial Assistance Act* to receive general purpose and local roads grants paid to local governments throughout Australia by the Australian government. The makeup of these local governing bodies is as follows:

Council Type	Councils incorporated under the <i>Local Government Act</i>	Councils incorporated under other Acts	Total
Municipal Councils	6		6
Community Government Councils	30		30
Association Councils		26	26
Special Purpose Town		1	1
Total	36	27	63

Of the 63 Councils in the Northern Territory, 51 are Indigenous, in that they have mostly Indigenous elected members or operate on Indigenous land. The municipal councils service the bulk of the Northern Territory population (210 000) with some 48 councils servicing populations of less than 1 000 residents. Despite the small number of residents in remote areas the populations are increasing due to high birth rates. This contrasts with remote towns in many parts of Australia that are in decline.

Factors contributing to skills shortages

Of the above councils only a few (Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs) have the least difficulty in attracting and retaining staff at the senior management level. This is not to say that they do not have difficulties rather it just means that they are more successful in recruiting such staff compared to all the other councils probably because of their size, geographical location, financial resources, access to services such as health and education, sport and recreation as well as housing and employment opportunities for their family members.

Generally speaking the municipal councils fare better than all other councils because they have more of the above mentioned attributes. Indeed these councils also tend to employ the full range of senior managers that one would expect to find in councils in other States. Whereas these councils tend to mirror the organisational structures of many councils interstate, the remaining councils tend to only employ a CEO and perhaps one other professional manager. Some councils only employ a CEO and a number of supervisors. Over 90% of CEOs are more than 50 years of age.

There is a dearth of senior managers in the Northern Territory. For example in local government there are approximately five engineers employed, there are only two human resource managers employed and about eight corporate services managers. Only three councils employ designated information technology managers.

Even though councils do not always employ the above professionals sometimes it is not through want of trying, particularly with corporate services managers. However, many councils have given up trying to attract such employees largely because they consider they will not be able to secure them. Numbers of applicants are generally small and often under qualified. As an alternative to employment they are outsourcing these kinds of skills. The Local Government Association of the Northern Territory ('the Association') has, in recent years, been trying to fill this void.

For those councils that employ senior managers the main concern is in their turnover. Some councils in the Northern Territory have had as many as seven CEOs over a period of three years. During 2005 the Association recruited 20 CEOs which represents a third of all councils. Retaining CEOs in employment therefore, is an issue with many not staying more than a couple of years. Factors such as 'burn out', difficulties adjusting to different cultures and a lack of senior manager support are major reasons for CEOs not staying in employment.

Initiatives to Tackle Skills Shortages

The Association has undertaken a number of strategies to not only recruit suitable senior managers (and especially CEOs) but to assist in retaining them longer. It has also taken action to try and 'fill the void' in areas of employment that are proving the most difficult to fill. These strategies include commencing:

- a recruitment and human resource management service in 2003
- an information technology service in 2004
- an engineering service in 2005

As part of the human resource management service the Association has commenced an induction course for new CEOs to assist them better prepare for their new workplace environments. The Association has witnessed many CEOs and senior managers failing in the workplace due to a lack of exposure to their 'real' conditions. For example, a corporate services manager coming from a council interstate may have had many years of experience working with a well resourced council but on coming to the Northern Territory experiences something quite different. The difference is the difficulty in having to do more 'hands on' work as a consequence of not having such resources.

The Association has also sought the assistance of interstate councils to provide personnel who are interested in gaining experience with Northern Territory Councils on a short term basis. For the most part this has not succeeded largely due to cost, availability and willingness of personnel to make the move. However, the Association has made contact with persons known to the councils and has recruited them. They include ex-CEOs that are in retirement or not currently working in local government. Further work needs to be done to see if councils are willing to allow their personnel to work for short periods.

The Association is also undertaking an Indigenous employment audit for the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and an outcome of it will be to pursue the implementation of training plans for councils with the aim of getting more Indigenous persons trained and in full time employment.

Initiatives for Consideration at the National Level

Some initiatives for consideration at the national level include:

1. looking at the possibility of coordinating a national scheme for personnel in local government to have professional development in the form of short term stints in regional and remote areas.
2. marketing the benefits of working in regional and remote areas
and

3. building on the work of ALGA and COAG that is currently being proposed in respect of training for regional and remote areas.