

Effective engagement from metals to maritime



Donald McKenzie is pictured in the port central control room of Fortescue Metals Group operations.

Indigenous workers are enjoying great opportunities in the evolving resource industry. As part of this special feature on Indigenous employment, *Australian Resources and Investment* talks with the Australian Mines and Metals Association (AMMA) about the industry's success stories – from Fortescue Metals to Offshore Marine Services.

Australia's wider resource industry is evolving rapidly, and while success in this area is not new to employers, the importance of Indigenous employment programs is more significant now than ever.

Engaging with Indigenous workers has proven to have many benefits for resource employers, including improving relations with local communities, promoting a more diverse and productive workforce and boosting a company's corporate social responsibility.

But with major gaps emerging in labour capabilities as Australia's resources activity continues to grow to unprecedented levels, Indigenous employment is an integral part of the overall skills picture.

National resource industry employer group AMMA has been a major

stakeholder in the various initiatives and policy settings put in place to fast-track the development of the Australian workforce.

According to AMMA Executive Director of Industry Minna Knight, resource employers are more dedicated to effective Indigenous employment programs than ever before.

'Outside of the industry there is still little understanding of the magnitude of the skills challenges facing the resources sector, with a predicted 90,000-person labour shortage expected in the coming years,' Ms Knight says.

'The industry remains dedicated to getting as many Indigenous people involved in our resources activity as possible. Whether it is on a company basis or the industry's overall involvement in the Australian Employment Covenant, these initiatives

are very important to address existing and future labour shortages.

'It is, however, important to remember that Indigenous employment effectively fits into a wider strategy that includes engaging with more women through the Australian Women in Resources Alliance, boosting our management capabilities through advanced leadership training programs, and providing opportunities for career changes through mature-age apprenticeships.'

Ms Knight says many of AMMA's member companies are involved in the Australian Employment Covenant, a national industry-led initiative aimed at securing the commitment of sustainable jobs for Indigenous Australians.

Of Australia's large miners, Fortescue Metals Group (FMG) has been particularly lauded for its dedication to the Covenant's mission, having worked the strategy of securing jobs for Indigenous Australians into its wider model for regional development.

'Fortescue successfully achieved its Summit 300 target to train and employ 300 Aboriginal people by 30 June 2011, during which Twiggy Forrest said "real employment opportunities are the key to ending the Indigenous disparity, which has long plagued Australia",' Ms Knight recalls.

More recently, FMG spent many millions of dollars protecting and avoiding significant Aboriginal heritage sites at its Solomon Hub project.

Through this mining operation, Fortescue will be able to help the Yindjibarndi community develop and enhance their lives through jobs, training and business opportunities. Already, \$120 million worth of Solomon Hub contracts have been signed with Indigenous groups and the project has delivered more than 30 jobs directly to members of the Yindjibarndi community living in Roebourne.

'Fortescue is proud of our record on Aboriginal employment and business development. Almost 10 per cent of our workforce is Indigenous, and a further 269 Aboriginal people are employed by our contractors,' says Fortescue's Director of Development, Peter Meurs.

'At our port operations in Port Hedland, 36 per cent of the team is Indigenous. More than \$300 million in contracts has been awarded to Aboriginal joint ventures and contractors in the past two years.'

Yet while FMG has led the way for large companies to follow suit and treat effective Indigenous employment as integral to an organisation's culture, Ms Knight says it is often the small and medium-sized employers who are 'truly innovating in this area'.

Each year at its National Conference, AMMA hosts its Annual Industry Awards, of which the Indigenous

Employment and Engagement Award is a highly sought-after accolade.

The Offshore Marine Services Alliance (OMSA), which provides marine transport support for many Western Australian oil and gas operations, including Chevron's Gorgon project, took out the award in 2012 after lodging a stand-out submission.

OMSA Employee Relations Manager Ben Matthews says the company's commitment to Indigenous employment goes 'well beyond' contractual requirements and is a statement of OMSA's social responsibility.

He says any true commitment to employing Indigenous people must come from the top of the organisations.

'You have to have that social responsibility embedded within the leader. We had a CEO at the time that was fully committed and fully motivated to do it for reasons other than just ticking a box,' says Matthews.

'We saw that there were jobs we had that we could train Indigenous applicants for and employ and put on really good working conditions throughout the duration of the project – and hopefully beyond, if our company continues to work on further projects like this one.'

'Part of our contract with Gorgon is committing to employing and training Indigenous employees, but we didn't just want to pay lip-service to it. We saw that as a commitment that goes beyond the contract – it was a social responsibility issue that our managing director took seriously.'

In a practical setting, Matthews says Indigenous people perform a range of roles within OMSA's operations, from deck hand to a fully qualified integrated rating position, which requires two years of training.

He believes having an Indigenous manager or mentor is often the key to successful engagement.

'I have found that the Indigenous employees relate to them, they understand them a lot better and cut through a lot of areas that, quite frankly, non-Indigenous people can't cut across,' he says.

'It was critical because typically they have been through similar struggles in the past, or have a natural affinity with each other. They have a shared purpose, or shared goal, which is to increase opportunities, employment and wealth within Indigenous communities.'

Several representatives from OMSA were present to receive the AMMA Industry Award for Indigenous Employment and Engagement – an accolade Minna Knight says is well deserved.

'OMSA is not as large as some other AMMA members that are demonstrating true commitment to training and employing Indigenous workers, but in terms of their success, they are truly punching well above their weight,' she says.

The company's pre-employment program has been a major success, with all 13 applicants who went through that system finding long-term jobs within OMSA.

'In the maritime sector, gaining an integrated rating is an exceptional accomplishment. It means that with OMSA's support, many of these Indigenous workers have options open to them, like becoming an engineer on a vessel or eventually becoming the skipper of their own vessel.'

'OMSA has shown that you can't instigate a program just to tick a box or market your organisation as socially responsible – in today's rapidly evolving market you really need to commit, and that's what our industry is doing.'

Ms Knight says the success stories of employers as different as Fortescue and OMSA are not rare in Australia's wider resource industry – it's just a matter of looking for them.

As the industry continues to ramp up these initiatives amid growing labour demand, *Australian Resources and Investment* looks forward to bringing you the stories of many more. [Read more](#)

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