



### Rail Attraction and Image: Interim Report

The Australian rail industry is in a period of expansion evidenced by increased patronage, revenues and infrastructure investment. This resurgence is reflected in the industry's current investment outlook across Australia. Against this backdrop is industry recognition that the Australian rail industry is not attracting sufficient numbers of engineers and skilled technicians to fulfil current and future infrastructure needs. Contemporary research suggests that this is because, in some cases, rail careers are not seen as attractive and, in other cases, because there is a lack of awareness of rail careers among traditional and non-traditional sources of recruitment. The Attraction and Image project aims to provide strategies which can redress this skills shortage.

To this end, the first stage project objective is to acquire better insight into external perceptions of rail and rail careers held by tertiary education providers (TAFE and universities), engineering students, careers advisors and recruitment consultants. This has not previously been attempted in a systematic way on a national scale and will make a significant contribution to the literature. The research will also investigate and document rail and similar industries' 'better' practices in employer branding and attraction strategies at both a national and international level. The deliverables have the potential to inform innovative practices that will enhance the image of rail as an employer of choice and attract a larger and more qualified pool of potential employees. These innovative practices can directly contribute to workforce planning and the sustainability of the industry.

In September 2009, the Project Steering Committee agreed to amend the original research methodology to articulate a three-stage, sequential and concurrent process that uses qualitative and quantitative methodologies. These are as follows: *Stage 1* (August–December 2009) will consist of an initial literature review and collection and analysis of qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with engineering students, apprentices and current graduate engineers, TAFEs, universities and the recruitment industry to identify how rail careers are perceived by labour markets and their influencers. *Stage 2* (January 2010–April/May 2010) will consist of a questionnaire building on the findings of the qualitative research undertaken in Stage 1. *Stage 3* (May 2010–September 2010) will involve additional interviews and focus groups and a continuation of the literature review.

The initial findings presented in the interim report are supported by the literature review and earlier CRC research. In general, rail careers are not currently seen as an attractive career path for engineers and skilled technicians. The rail industry continues to be perceived as public service, old, poorly paid, bureaucratic and uninteresting. In addition, the belief that rail could 'pigeon-hole' an engineer is perceived as a definite risk to graduating students. The main competitors to rail careers identified to date are the large public entities and engineering consultancies that are perceived to be exciting, high-tech, big, lucrative and career enhancing.

Overall, there is very limited knowledge of rail careers in either the public sector or private engineering consultancies among students and careers advisors. Teachers and academics are generally aware of opportunities but limited in their promotion of rail careers through lack of rail-specific content in current engineering courses and direct participation from industry. The research

to date identifies personal commuter experience, media coverage and family and friends as the main influencers of student perceptions of rail careers. Students with exposure to rail through friends or family members and current rail graduates and apprentices have a more balanced and positive view of working in public rail. Recruiters indicated that their influence can be considerable (negative/positive) based on the relationships that they have with the individual HR team within the rail organisation.

The most common career anchors (listed in order of decreasing priority) identified by the focus groups conducted to date are as follows:

- Remuneration
- Continuing professional development
- Work security
- Diversity of experience
- Flexible work conditions

However, students often target their first employer based on the likelihood of a career opening in their discipline. Students typically nominated high brand awareness as influential when considering their first employer.

Low industry engagement was reported by most TAFE and university teachers, academics and careers advisors. Some recruiters suggested inconsistent engagement with industry makes it difficult for recruitment partners to effectively 'sell' rail to candidates.

From these findings, it is possible to conclude that the rail industry will continue to face attraction and image problems unless it takes a whole-of-industry approach to rebrand itself, including potential joint media and public relations initiatives. Cultural change in the public sector and improvements in areas such as recruitment practices could do much to reduce the image of bureaucracy. In addition, the rail industry needs to engage far more strategically with educational providers and industry skills councils so as to embed rail awareness into vocational and university curriculums. Finally, any progress towards harmonisation of rail technologies will improve the portability of rail skills and reduce the perception of 'pigeon-holing'.

Despite the inherent challenges, the initial findings of the research suggest that while the rail industry currently has trouble attracting engineers and skilled technicians, its current investment trajectory, environmental concerns and the emerging public/private partnerships offer enormous opportunities for rail to rebrand itself as an attractive career proposition for graduate engineers and skilled technicians.