

Skills gap drives Cowara offshore

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MARGARET River-based transport and wine logistics specialist, Cowara Group, has experienced first hand the pressures of Western Australia's tight labour market.

Established in 1988 by South West farmers Chip Yelverton and Steve Duggan, the company's primary business was centred around providing earthmoving and civil construction engineering within the Busselton and Augusta-Margaret River shires.

Since then, Cowara's offering has expanded to provide heavy haulage and road transport services, and the group has split its operations into two divisions in 2005 – Cowara Contractors, specialising in earthmoving and dam construction, and Cowara Transport Pty Ltd, which offers wine logistics and general freight services.

With its acquisition of Brambles Wine Tanker Division in mid-2000, Cowara became the largest turnkey wine logistics business in the state.

With a team of 50 permanent employees and seasonal casuals, its regional location has proved a major challenge in trying to source experienced staff.

Human resources manager Ron Gower said the company, which has doubled in size since he joined seven years ago, had struggled to find local experienced truck drivers to fill positions in recent years.

"It's always been difficult to get truck drivers in this area, now it's near on impossible," he told *WA Business News*.

And while the Margaret River region is an appealing place to visit, the area's high rents and shortage of housing is a turn-off for many potential employees from Perth, according to Mr Gower.

"People are attracted to the area, but when it comes down to wanting to live here, there are a



RELOCATION: Cowara Transport HR manager Ron Gower (right) says Paul Roberts (left) provided a solution to the company's staffing problem.

PROBLEM SOLVING

COMPANY: Cowara Transport.

BUSINESS: Transport, wine logistics and warehousing services in the Busselton-Augusta-Margaret River area.

PROBLEM: Finding experienced truck drivers to live and work in Margaret River region.

SOLUTION: Bring in experienced UK-based workers using the 457 visa program.

many considerations that need to be made," he said.

"There are a lot of issues they have to contend with."

The departure of Cowara's transport manager in April, lured to the north of the state by generous wages, left the company with the challenge of

from a UK-based transport worker expressing his interest to work for his company, having previously visited the region while on holiday.

Impressed with the candidate's resume and experience, which included extensive experience in the transport sector, Mr Gower

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filling his position, in addition to a number of driver positions.

Frustrated with the lack of suitable local candidates, Mr Gower decided to cast his net over a wider field of candidates, looking at overseas-based workers to fill the gap.

He had received an email

committed to relocating his new transport manager out to Australia on a 457 visa.

To assist in the application, the UK-based candidate, Paul Roberts, contracted migration agents Live In Australia. Cowara also engaged Live In to assist with its application to the

Department of Immigration to enable Mr Roberts to relocate on the temporary working visa, with a view to permanent residency.

Mr Gower said the assistance provided by Live In was vital, since he had no previous experience in the area, and was too busy with his day-to-day workload to devote substantial time to completing the required paperwork.

"They [the immigration department] wanted a lot of financial information on the company and projected cash flows for the next four years," he said.

"We also had to answer a series of questions. You've got to show there's a need to have this person here and how he is going to bring knowledge and experience to Australia that you can't already get here."

Mr Gower said the effect of the state's skills shortage on the company was its central argument for why Mr Roberts should be granted the visa.

Two to three months after the initial contact was made between the two parties, Mr Roberts relocated to Margaret River and was permitted to commence employment with Cowara Transport.

"He [Paul] was a ready made package. He was able to step straight in," Mr Gower said.

Since Mr Roberts started with the company, Mr Gower said he had received two further expressions of interest from UK-based transport workers looking to relocate to WA to find work.

And with the company regularly two to three drivers short, Mr Gower is confident that, now he has successfully completed one 457 visa application, the process will be more familiar the second, and possibly third, time around.

And while Cowara still looked to fill positions locally first, the difficulty in competing with high salaries offered in other industries had forced the company to look outside the local market, Mr Gower said.