

Highlighting the ‘super’ skills of operator supervisors in NSW local water utilities

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A day in the life of a water operator carries big responsibilities and requires a broad skillset. How do we ensure that we attract amazing people to these roles, and then, how do we train and retain them? Having a supportive and knowledgeable supervisor goes a long way to ensuring the industry retains great operators. What skills and support do the supervisors need?

In this paper, we reflect on workforce composition data, explore challenges and opportunities of attraction and retention of staff and the skillsets required to make sure the ‘super’ skills are clearly reflected in supervisors.

Attraction and retention

We know that to attract amazing operators to local water utilities (LWUs) we need to offer more than an attractive salary.

The NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (the department) has partnered with industry to develop a suite of [tools](#) to assist LWUs to highlight operator roles during recruitment, and showcase the benefits of employment in LWUs.

Succession planning and knowledge transfer within operational roles is important. Diverse role models and effective mentors play a critical role in the culture of an organisation. There is an opportunity to increase workforce participation of females, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other underrepresented groups in operational roles.

LWUs cannot expect to attract and retain staff purely through higher pay and must consider the whole workplace culture. Employees should feel valued, that the work they do has purpose and meaning, as well as being appropriately remunerated. Incentives to ensure employees feel supported may include options for flexible working or opportunities for vehicle leaseback arrangements. Providing access to appropriate training and learning and development opportunities, including clear pathways for career progression, will help build resilience for individual employees, teams and the entire LWU sector.

Spotlight on supervisors

The NSW Local Water Utility Workforce Composition Report developed by the department, reveals staff shortages of operators, and their supervisors. With the new wave of funding to support the increase of trainees into the industry, are our supervisors equipped to support and mentor them?

The role of operator supervisors or team leaders is critical to effective functioning of any operational team. Supervisors are usually skilled operators with advanced problem-solving abilities, combined with leadership and management skills. They are a key driver of team culture, communication between frontline roles and management, and mentors and role models for new operators in training.

The figure below shines a spotlight on the common characteristics of these roles in NSW LWUs.





 Age	The survey identified supervisor/team leader roles as the oldest age profile across all roles. 48% of water supervisor/team leaders and 54% of wastewater supervisor/team leaders are over the age of 50.
 Gender	Supervisor/team leader roles had one of the lowest percentages of female employees, with only 2 out of 184 total roles held by females.
 Role vacancies	Vacancies in supervisor/team leader roles differed significantly between the coastal and western regions. In the coastal region, vacancy rates were low (3% for water, 6% for wastewater). However, in the western region, nearly one in 5 roles were vacant (19% for water, 18% for wastewater). These were also two of the longest periods of vacancies, with around two-thirds of the roles (67% for water, 64% for wastewater) vacant for longer than 6 months.
 Pay	Supervisor/team leader roles were the highest paid of all frontline operational roles. Some roles in major sized LWUs attracted pay at rates above the equivalent of Band 3 Level 4, with 15% of water and 8% of wastewater supervisors paid at this higher rate. No supervisor/team leaders in big, medium or small LWUs were paid at this higher rate.

Figure 1 Spotlight on supervisors

There is a significant need for new supervisors/team leaders over the coming years, particularly in the western region. Training and support are required to transition operators into these leadership roles. There is an opportunity for increased gender diversity and participation of Aboriginal people within the critical roles of supervisors, which could provide benefits to LWUs by promoting inclusion, innovation and a wider range of role models for new starters.

The figure below shows job roles by age group. For roles in the age group 51-60, supervisors were the most common.

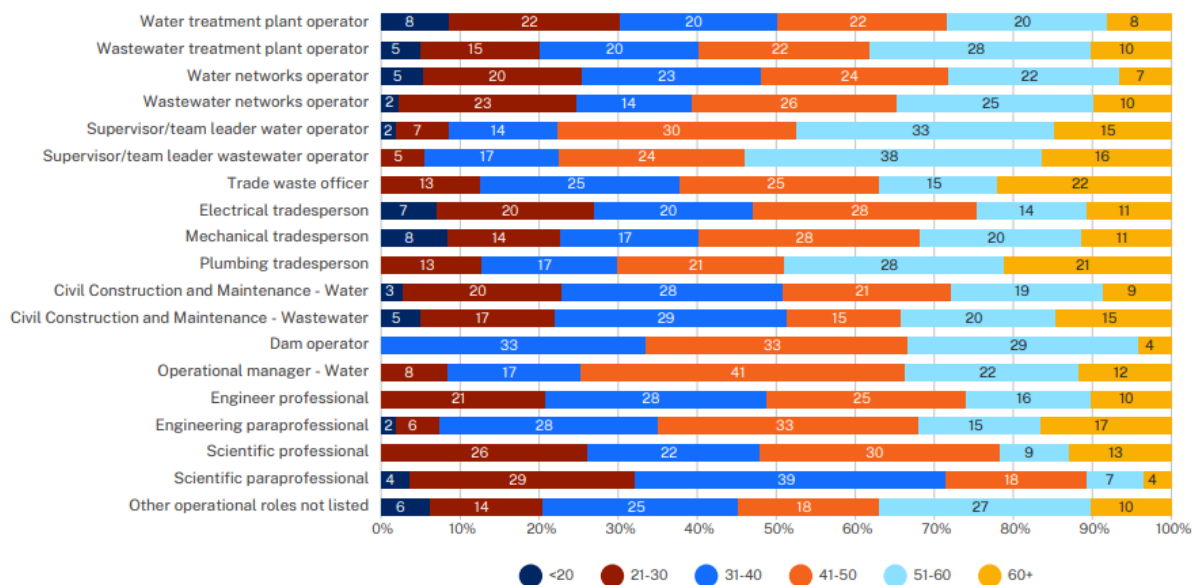


Figure 2 Percentage of employees in age ranges by job role

The figure below shows vacancies by role and duration. The three key leadership roles of supervisor/team leader water, supervisor/team leader wastewater, and operational manager water had some of the longest periods of vacancy. In these roles, about two-thirds of the vacant positions were empty for more than six months.

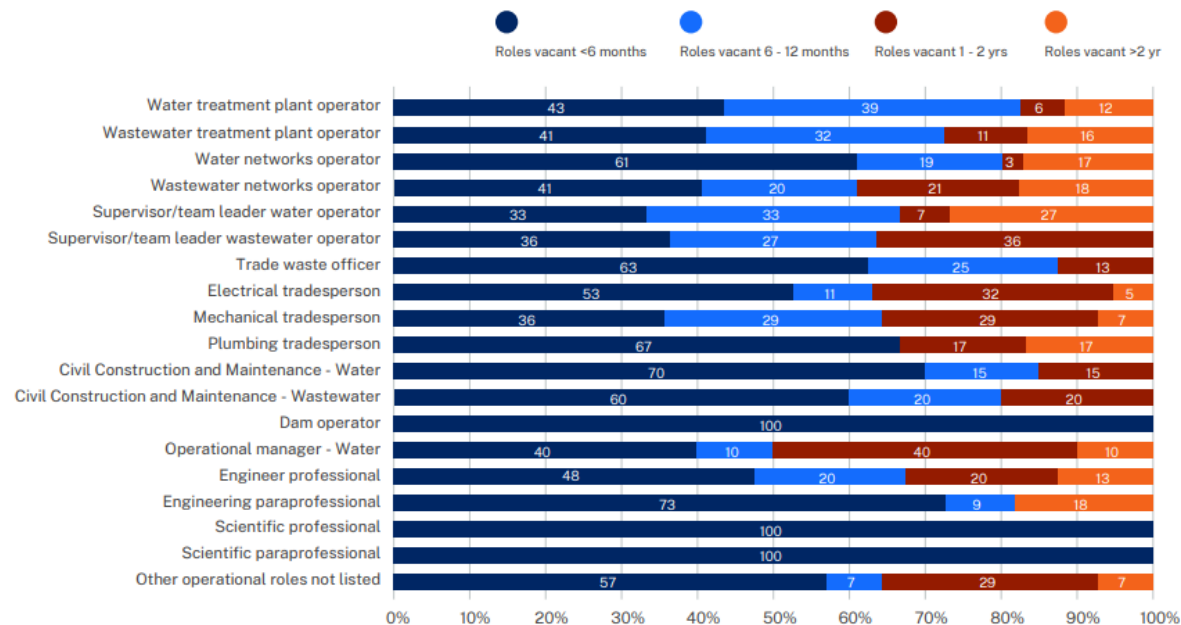


Figure 3 Percentage duration of vacancies by role

The department is partnering with Office of Local Government to develop a pilot training program to provide supervisors with the skills they need to supervise trainees, provide work skill instruction,

assessment and mentoring in the workplace and develop a work team and culture. These skills are just as important as operational processes.

The department has produced a Traineeship guide: A handbook for local water utilities, which gives guidance on the process to employ a trainee, including responsibilities and the role of supervisors and mentors. The handbook can be found here: [Careers in the water industry](#).

Conclusion

Increasing the number of trainees within the LWU sector, is a positive step towards a sustainable workforce. The role of supervisors is critical to ensure trainees receive the support they need to succeed. As the composition of the workforce changes, supervisors must be able to adapt to ensure they are capable of providing support to younger generations, and increased numbers of females, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other under-represented groups.