



Australian Government

07
minister's awards for
EXCELLENCE



J Smith & Sons Pty Ltd

**Winner of the Minister's Award
for Excellence for Employers of
Australian Apprentices 2007
(QLD – South Region)**

“Without Australian Apprentices we would not have had company growth which has led to overseas export of product. It has allowed us to remain productive and competitive in the market. Apprentices are rotated around so they have greater knowledge of the company and various facets of the industry. This can lead to specialisation if they want to. They develop skills and become leaders within the company.”

***Ms Deb Crichton, Human Resources Manager,
J Smith & Sons Pty Ltd***

Starting in Gympie 106 years ago making wagons, J Smith & Sons is a family company which has evolved into a world-renowned manufacturer of specialised trailers for the transport industry.

Now managed by Kerren Smith, the grandson of the founder, the company is the winner of the Minister's Award for Excellence for Employers of Australian Apprentices 2007 for the Queensland south region.

From the outset, J Smith & Sons has employed Australian Apprentices; there are currently 11 in the

**A U S T R A L I A N
A P P R E N T I C E S H I P S**

Your Life. Your Career. Your Future.



boilermaking and automotive body-building trades. The company employs 76 people.

Human Resources Manager Deb Crichton mentions that many other Australian Apprentices are supported by Smiths. “We regularly sub-contract and provide jobs for other companies around Gympie. Therefore, we create work for other apprentices not employed by us.”

J Smith & Sons has no trouble attracting Australian Apprentices. “We are very fortunate that the company has a good reputation, most walk in with their resumes,” Ms Crichton says. “We interview them all, to see if they’re in line with the company values – motivation, commitment, team player.”

Some Australian Apprentices commence as school-based apprentices, and others are existing employees encouraged to up-skill.

Ms Crichton believes effort must be invested in Australian Apprentices. “We have a continuous improvement policy. We have an Apprentice of the Year award. We pay for their fees. We seek feedback from them. We nurture and appreciate their feedback and actively encourage them in that process. It identifies opportunities for future improvement and growth in our apprentices.”

“It is not just about having an apprentice. We look for continued improvement in ourselves towards our apprentices. We believe training is life-long.”

The Australian Apprentices have a weekly group meeting with Edgar Brus, who is a Team Leader and also the Training Officer. “It is a very open process, structured but not formal. The idea is that it is better to deal with issues before they become problems,” Ms Crichton says. “Edgar does a great job developing a rapport with the apprentices.”

“Every three months the apprentices evaluate their own apprenticeships and this gives us great feedback.”

Another role-model to the Australian Apprentices is Ian Kyte, who started with the company as an apprentice blacksmith 37 years ago. “Ian is now a Team Leader, Quality Assurance Officer and Workplace Health & Safety Officer. Although his role is now more supervisory, he still works side-by-side with a couple of new apprentices in his crew.”

Ms Crichton is enthusiastic about the relationship with the Australian Apprenticeship Centre, Mission Australia. “They are excellent, absolutely excellent, delivering a very valued service, following up on everything. We have great communication with them.”

“The AAC representative has apprentices at heart. She meets all of them, and makes herself available to apprentices if needed. If I have any queries about training or government schemes she finds out the relevant information. She always seems to be up to date. Mission Australia sends her off to workshops



and courses. It is all to our benefit.

Ms Crichton suggests people seek career counselling, then network companies when seeking an Australian Apprenticeship. “There’s a great future, great career opportunities. The opportunity is there to become tomorrow’s leaders and managers. As they develop experience and knowledge they become valued employees. And this gives personal satisfaction.”

Work experience is also recommended. “It is a four year commitment to do an apprenticeship so work experience is a good way to come to a decision if the career is for them,” Ms Crichton says. “Apprentices give great growth to the company but they really need to know if the industry is the one for them.”

The majority of Smith’s apprentices go to the Sunshine Coast Institute of TAFE or Wide Bay TAFE. “Only first year is done at Gympie,” Ms Crichton says. “We get reports and assessments on the apprentices; the rapport is good with the TAFEs. There is two-way reporting – we let them know about the apprentice’s progress in the workplace as well.”

Australian Apprentices are exposed to industry development through involvement with the company’s research and development program. “The engineers have developed specialist equipment for mine sites. The apprentices get to work on these specialised projects as well as everyday production. This gives variety in their work lives.”

Management meetings include Team Leaders; policy and procedures are in place to ensure industry developments are passed through the company, including Australian Apprentices.

The J Smith & Sons Apprentice of the Year is selected as an outcome of the Training Officer and supervisors’ evaluations of the Australian Apprentices. “The evaluation is quite in-depth, covering interpersonal, trade and leadership skills,” Ms Crichton says.

“There is a cash prize plus tools provided by our suppliers who’ve come on board to support the apprentices. There is a keenness to take out the award and it is extremely hard to choose one – I’m glad I’m not doing it!”