

**"2004 - A Very Tough Year" – Presentation by James Barron to GTA Victoria State Conference, 13 November 2003**

Group Training Australia, the group training network and group training are well positioned going into 2004. We are stronger than we have been for quite awhile.

As a lobbying and advocacy force we have more credibility , more status and more influence than we have had for a long time.

As a network – our contribution to the maintenance of our national trade and skills base is unquestioned. And importantly it is now being acknowledged and recognised more widely.

There will always be a range of issues upon which our network is engaged in and upon which many of us will have differing views, levels of concern, worry or even optimism. Be it the amount of direct government support for group training, joint policy funding, skill shortage solutions, labour market interaction, the place for group training, the relevance of pastoral care. On none of these subjects – will we get 100 % agreement across the board – and nor should we expect to do so.

But the over-riding and important thing is that as a network – we present a united front “when it matters”....

Doing so does not mean that we all have to share the same opinion or that we don't encourage robust and willing internal debate. But it does mean that when lobbying decision makers – governments understand that our network is a force to be reckoned with and our voice carries weight and resonates not only with our own network but with the wider VET community as well.

Achieving this “Happy State” is ultimately where all successful national associations want to be. And we are getting there – I have absolutely no doubt.

Key questions that we continually ask ourselves and which concentrate the minds of our members are predictable but very important ones.

- ♣ Where are we heading?
- ♣ Are we making progress?
- ♣ Are we relevant?
- ♣ Are we more politically savvy and influential?

And at the end of 2003 – we ask ourselves another question...are we, as a network and as an association, stronger than we were say 12 or 24 months ago?

The bottom line of any association worth its salt is to represent members interests/get a better deal for them/influence government/create and change policy/effectively communicate the key messages, “be noticed” and always have a place at the table.

I believe on all these key measurements and questions, we are on the Move and on the Improve.

We are far from achieving “advocacy nirvana”, but we are certainly making significant gains as an association. 2004 will be a very tough year I believe and the most important and encouraging thing about our progress this year is that it will at least allow us to argue the toss and fight the policy and political battles from a position of some strength and credibility.

But of course no man or woman is an island and it is critical that we fight our battles with allies.

Take the skills shortage issue. By any measure – this is one of THE more important policy and political debates to be had over the coming years.

GTA has engaged some key national players in our efforts to lobby and influence government. With the Dusseldorp Skills Forum we organised a major round-table event at the Sydney Technology Park. And in their recent pre Budget submission, ACCI, in the skills shortage recommendations, specifically identifies partnering with GTA in a project to better leverage the power of the group training network in dealing with certain skill shortage problems.

Since the Forum, GTA has formally been invited by DEST to join the National Industry Skills Initiative forum (NISI), after three and half years of being in absentia.

GTA has been working with DEWR since the Forum to better join up GTOs and Job Network Members under Job Network 3. And importantly, we continue to work with DSF to build on the work and learnings of the July Forum. None of which is going to change anything overnight – but all of which have the POTENTIAL to influence future policy and Budget deliberations.

We are not sitting on the sidelines – we are attempting to put ourselves on as many radar screens as possible and hope that we hit a few targets.

Whilst on the issue of Skills Shortage – the Majority (non government senators) and Minority (government senators) Reports into the Inquiry into Current and Future Skills Needs was tabled last Thursday.

My initial response – and I stress “initial”, having not read the full report but all of the recommendations and the full text of the Minority Report?...in one word ...underwhelmed...

Of course, there are many many welcome and honourable mentions:

- ♣ The importance of pre apprenticeship programs;
- ♣ The importance of dealing with the RPL issue;
- ♣ The need for increased investment in VET;
- ♣ The absolutely critical need to join up job network and private and public training institutions in fighting skill shortage;
- ♣ The need to substantially improve the quality of careers advice in schools;
- ♣ Getting training packages right;
- ♣ Getting the qualifications framework right;
- ♣ The need to improve the status of the trades in the minds of students and parents; and
- ♣ The need to better and more aggressively market across the board etc etc

None of which I have a problem with at all – they are all eminently sensible and fundamental if we are to effectively deal with this problem.

But you know what? We have all heard them time and time again...

My concerns have less to do with the guts of the reports – but more to do with “where to now”?

Where will these reports be in six months time? Will dust simply gather? What will **really** change? What urgency will be bought to bear?

It is our job and that of all interested parties to ensure that something **is** done and done sooner rather than later.

Changes in VET often seem to move at “Glacial Speed”....

Infuriating and frustrating are words that come to mind – and when changes are made – uniformity of implementation is hopelessly compromised by the totally unacceptable “federated” VET system.

In the context of dealing with growing skill shortages – “Glacial” is simply not a speed that is good enough or acceptable any-more and the dog’s breakfast response of 8 jurisdictions is not capable of delivering medium to long term policy solutions.

National leadership is needed to move on this and if heads need to be knocked together then so be it...

Genuine solutions to skill shortages must not be allowed to founder at the hands of squabbling bureaucrats and political points scoring. The sea of words and technical jargon that are in danger of drowning all those who sail in the good ship VET – must be simplified and de-constructed. There is absolutely **no need** to commission any **more** reports or to undertake any **further** rounds of consultation. And most certainly this issue cannot be addressed by putting our heads in the sand, tinkering at the edges or playing party politics.

Getting these messages across will be one of GTAs key challenges in 2004.

And of course another key message for GTA next year will again be DON’T MESS WITH GROUP TRAINING!....

Of course, many of you would already think that group training has been messed with enough.

For the past two and half years, the entire sector has lived with the reality of the ongoing review of group training services by ANTA. As a result, a series of changes will impact on the sector from now on – not least the national standards and the progressive opening up of the market.

While both of these changes have not been particularly welcomed by much of the sector – I firmly believe that the sector has and will survive the review in much better shape than was originally envisaged (particularly by it’s detractors).

At the beginning of the review – the nay-sayers were lining up with their baseball bats and their radical plans for surgery bandied about. Yet during the course of the Review – Group Training has I feel “rehabilitated” itself – as has Group Training Australia.

Yes of course some of the changes will not be to our networks liking. But the bottom line is that the sky will not fall in – the network will not be turned upside down and indeed there are now political and policy opportunities available to us to grab on to. But only if we present as a strong and effective unit.

Next Friday on the Gold Coast the next ANTA MINCO meeting will take place.

It is where the final touches will be put on the last stages of the group training review. There will be no earth shuddering announcement from this meeting re group training (the focus will be on the next ANTA Agreement). There will be no surprises – most of what will happen or is planned we already know.

Our continuing focus post MINCO and the beginning of the next financial year, with the in-principle agreement to “open up the market”, will always be on arguing the toss for increased Joint Policy funding. I believe this remains a distinct possibility.

If the States can achieve growth (and they all have predicted they will post 2004/05) and they are prepared to put additional funds into the Joint Bucket, I believe there is every chance that the Commonwealth will match it.

Over the next three financial years beginning 2004/05 – what then are we talking about? What ballpark figure do we believe will be required to ensure that there is adequate and appropriate “resourcing” of the sector?

Over three years – the grand total of \$4 million - 2 million from the Commonwealth and \$2 million from the combined treasuries of 8 State and Territory jurisdictions.

These numbers are minuscule – even more so when you consider that there has been no real increase in total Joint Policy expenditure for group training these past 6 financial years.

Securing **any** increased in Joint Policy funds will be a real dog fight I suspect, but advocacy for this outcome must be an absolute high priority for GTA and all State Associations.

2004 will be a very tough and challenging year for group training Australia and the network. But we are well positioned to keep on the front foot and play a very aggressive and constructive role in the skilling of the nation.

And from my perspective – Group Training Australia will not die wondering in 2004.

We are committed to doing all in our power to making it a very rewarding year for ourselves and for every group training organisation in the country.