

SAE-A Plan to Stop the Automotive Engineering Skills Drain

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The closure of automotive manufacturing and some engineering design centers in Australia looks likely to result in a massive skills drain from Australia due to highly qualified engineers being made redundant and seeking employment overseas.

The Society of Automotive Engineers – Australasia (SAE-A) estimates that more than 2,000 professional engineers and technicians are being made redundant across Australia – with up to 85% of those located in Victoria. Many redundancies of professional staff are taking place now, as design and development work comes to an end on vehicles and components that will be manufactured up until 2017.

As professional engineers hold qualifications that are internationally recognized, their skills are extremely portable. Whilst Australia tries to figure out what to do with thousands of unemployed engineers and technicians, in the United States alone, there is high demand, with more than 7,000 current vacancies for automotive engineers. Significant skills shortages also exist in Europe and Asia for automotive engineers.

The SAE-A has noted a sharp increase in the number of overseas companies advertising in Australia seeking automotive engineers for international postings. A number of foreign companies currently have talent scouts in or heading to Australia, interviewing Australian engineers for overseas jobs. Whilst historical data shows that many engineers eventually return to Australia, a large percentage do not, resulting in a permanent loss of skill and knowledge which is detrimental to national development.

What help is there for engineers? Effective programs, such as 'workers in transition', exist primarily to assist manufacturing and production workers find new employment. At present, there is no program in Australia whose sole function is to support professional automotive engineers and technicians transition to other industries.

On 22nd April 2014, SAE-A President Adrian Feeney, and SAE-A Executive Director Natalie Roberts, met with Minister Hodgett (Victorian Minister for Manufacturing) to discuss the issue of a skills and knowledge drain, and to put forward a funding proposal for a program to support professional engineers and technicians in transitioning to other industries in Australia.

The proposed program, which would be an industry first in focusing on professional engineers and technicians, would run from October 2014 – December 2017 & include:

- Skills mapping for future employment, to demonstrate how specific skills align with, and can be utilized in other industries
- One-on-one assistance through mentoring, resume development, interview techniques, and education on employment opportunities in new sectors
- Assisting automotive engineers in finding opportunities to reskill
- Career networking events, connecting automotive engineers with potential employers &/or recruiters, and educating employers about the benefits that engineers can bring to businesses
- Recruitment, whereby SAE-A would actively work with employers in non-automotive industries to facilitate employment opportunities

Due to its close ties to engineering industry, the Society of Automotive Engineers – Australasia is ideally positioned to identify the upcoming needs of the automotive

engineering community, and work with individuals and industry to support those made redundant over the next few years. The SAE-A intends on making the proposed support program available to all engineers made redundant due to the shutdown of manufacturing and design centers in Australia, not just SAE-A members.

The proposal received a very positive reception from Minister Hodgett. The Minister stated that he would speak with his counterparts, Minister MacFarlane (Federal Minister for Industry) and Minister Wakeling (Victorian Minister for Skills and Higher Education) to encourage them to support the proposed program and to meet with the SAE-A.

SAE-A has already engaged industry, having met with senior executives at the automotive manufacturers, seeking backing for the professional transition program for the program, and has received very positive feedback to date. To maximize the benefits of the program SAE-A will seek additional funding from industry.

The Society of Automotive Engineers Australasia will continue to work with State and Federal Government in addition to industry, to enable it to provide support to professional automotive engineers and technicians, who are currently not well covered with existing transition programs.

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