

INFOCUS



This month we introduce Michelle Weaver, CEO of Velg Training. After completing her Bachelors of Education, Michelle went on to complete a Graduate Certificate in Education (Leadership and Management). Michelle taught for a few years in Australia and then went overseas to work at the Bournemouth University for a few months. She was doing web design in the nineties when the World Wide Web was still in its infancy.

In 1999 Michelle returned to Australia where she taught economics and accounting at St Margaret's Girls School near Brisbane. They soon realised that Michelle could teach the VET students so she was moved to VET students and by the end of 2001 she was asked to be the VET Co-coordinator.

From Humble Beginnings To A National Organisation In Five Short Years

Michelle from an early stage had a knack for finding information and explaining it to her co-workers. Since most school teachers were not really knowledgeable in the VET sector, she became a ready resource of information for a lot of them. She formed a group of schools, where Michelle joined monthly meetings with other VET Coordinators in those schools. She soon realised that she was the one who was always explaining, teaching or doing presentations to explain things that others were asking for her help with internal reviews. Michelle's husband was a lawyer and pointed out to her that she was doing all this work and not charging for her time that she was spending on educating others. He encouraged her to go into business for herself and setup a consultancy. At the time Michelle wasn't sure if she could do this so she moved into a Careers Counsellor at Cannon Hill Anglican College. It took her husband two years to finally convince her to risk her stable pay and a good job to go out on her own and start her own business. She did that and on the 1st April 2003 she started the Voc Ed Learning Group. Voc Ed Learning Group later became commonly known as VELG and the organisation was re-branded two years ago to their current name of Velg Training.

Michelle started consulting with schools as that was her background and she knew there was a big demand for further education and know-how about VET within the schools sector. In the first year of operation Michelle got her hands on a list of every School in Queensland and their fax numbers. She registered an ABN and went down to Office Works and purchased a fax machine and wrote up a flyer (which she still has to this day) and sent it out to all the schools. Within 48 hours she had 122 replies for participation and she had to close it down. Michelle could see there was a business in this, and selling the workshop at \$100 a piece she had made the same amount of money in one day that would have made working for three months in her old job. This was the encouragement that she wanted and it got her kick-started to pursue it with gusto.

She continued with these workshops and did about nine per year. At this time Michelle's twin sister (who was working for an RTO) asked "Why aren't you doing these workshops for the other RTOs? in Queensland" Michelle realised that she could widen her market and she began serving the entire RTO sector within Queensland. She then decided to move into NSW because she figured that they might also need these workshops. She was soon questioned by the NSW governing department at the time as to why she was running workshops in NSW without their approval. Michelle stood her ground, as she believed she was helping the industry and offering valuable information. Over time organisations from NSW have become one of Velg's biggest clients.

Michelle realised as a result of the NSW experience that she should perhaps approach things differently when

going to other states. She approached the governing bodies in Victoria first approaching the clients there and they were very happy to welcome Michelle into the state. Pretty soon Velg was a national organisation with the exception of Tasmania, which they have been approaching via Webinars and other smaller events in the last six months.

Democratic Leadership Style... To A Point

Michelle believes her management style is quite democratic and she encourages and fosters innovation. However, it has to be balanced with decision making and getting to a result. *"As the CEO I involve the employees in decisions. As a business owner I feel I am better served by a more democratic approach, as I believe this promotes responsibility and individual leadership. I learnt early in the piece that if my business was to be efficient and achieve its full potential, all my employees needed to work together as a well-functioning team... Bringing out the best from my staff is an important part of my management style. In the words of Henry Ford, coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress and working together is success."*



Introducing Michelle Weaver

She is open and honest about her background that when she started her business journey in 2003 she mostly had theoretical knowledge, as she was a senior secondary teacher. *"All my experiences were based on what I learnt from a textbook. Ten years on I can confidently say I have the personal skills and capabilities of running a very successful business. Fast forward to 2012 I believe I have skills in the area of finance, marketing, sales, leadership and communication. To run a successful business it is essential that you recognise the limits of your abilities and know when it's best to hand over tasks to others. I offer my staff a sense of direction and get them to share their visions for the business by creating the conditions for them to achieve results."*

Positive About Industry Evolution But More Work Is Needed

When asked what Michelle thought were some of the changes happening within the VET Sector, Michelle believes that there has been some good steps taken in the past few years with a renewed emphasis on quality, particularly in the training and assessment that is being provided, and an intention to ensure national consistency in learner outcomes across all industry areas.

However, she believes that there is more work to be done. *"I don't agree that we truly have a national system in place until Victoria and Western Australia join the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA)."*

She illustrates that with an example, *"See I've got a School that has been with us for six years and they still have got problems. Personal Development (PD) is very important to RTOs but in any business when things get tight, the first two areas that go (down) are Marketing and PD. Once there was a lot of money in PD but these days RTOs are not spending any money or time on this as much as they should. When it comes to people, because it changes and it constantly changes it is so difficult to stay up to date."*

"I believe there needs to be an industry voice and I'm actually an advocate that they come up with some sort of points system like the Board of Teacher Registration here in Queensland. Generally speaking the demand to keep up to date and current means that most VET Coordinators or RTO Managers have a life span of about 18 months to 2 years. They are getting burnt out, it's hard to keep up to date."

Michelle is an advocate of the National System. *"All States need to come under one system. We need to have consistency instead of having State branches and departments so that it all comes under one place."*

Over her years of dealing with a whole range of organisations, she has seen some horrific things that RTOs are doing. She is also critical of the Certificate in a cereal box approach where some RTOs are delivering fast tracked certificates. *"Doing a TAE course in 2 or 3 days is not acceptable, of course they are not going to know how to write an assessment in two days."*

Some Common Mistakes That RTOs Still Make Today

Some of the issues that Michelle and her staff see with RTOs on a regular basis include:

- Issuing Qualifications that are not on their scope
- Issuing Statements of Attainment from superseded training packages
- Lack of detail in staff records for Professional Development
- Staff that are training without meeting the HR determinations

The most common mistake she sees is RTOs delivering qualifications that are not on their scope or delivering units of competency that are either superseded or not on their scope.

When Michelle was asked about things that she loves about this Industry she commented that seeing the 'students' actually graduate, to see the student that had a hard slog to get through and graduate into an area they wanted to get into that's the best thing.

She thinks the Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) do a really good job but she thinks some give more than others and there is room for improvement there. *"We do audits for departments, non-profits, schools and normal RTOs and it's interesting to see how they didn't realise they didn't know something. But once they know what they needed to know then they were able to get in and get it done. And I think the sad part about VET is that if you can't afford to do PD or get information from other places then it's a difficult industry to navigate your way through."* For instance, Michelle did a Power Point presentation on 'Staying connected in VET'. She sat down and did a list of every acronym and the list got to beyond a 100 acronyms! Furthermore if someone tried to view it as a hierarchical organisational chart there simply wasn't one for the VET industry. It took two people three days to work it out and that is something that they give to all their members now.

It is recognised that there is a lack of good reliable information, a lack of free workshops and webinars and people do need help and guidance. Michelle's comment to this was *"I'm not in this business to make a million dollars a year, I'm in this business because it doesn't exist. ASQA say they are not here to advise you, if they took this off and they were to provide templates you needed to use and gave that guidance, then that would be fantastic. I'd be out of a job but I'd still be happy."*

Business Advice From A Master

After nearly ten years in Business, Michelle has learnt some real practical know-how. The biggest problem

Michelle faced in her business journey was that she didn't have a strategic plan; as initially she didn't think it was necessary. She hadn't put strategic goals, KPI's etc in place, even though she was teaching these things to her students. She has since addressed that and Velg have developed a culture of revisiting and revitalising their strategy and their mission every 2-3 years.

Michelle has always been a conservative and prudent businesswoman and had rules around making sure she was adequately resourced financially. She always makes sure that Velg have the resources and money they would need for a series of workshops before putting it on. She also applies this principle to hiring new staff and ensures they have one year's worth of wages in reserve before hiring someone new. *"In recent years, I have put in place that the business actual saves the salary required for the new position for the first twelve months before hiring anyone new. I like to know that the business can afford the new team member."*

Michelle is also an advocate for long probations for new staff. *"I learnt my lesson that 3 month probations do not work, you really need to see someone over a 6 month probation period."*

Building systems and building a real integrated business where everything works is another master key that Michelle believes has helped to foster an environment where her staff can be innovative. Velg have built their own custom software system to keep track of all attendees, manage finances, billing, attendance and marketing. This software system has cost Velg more than \$200,000 over the past two years but it has given her a lot more control, insight and visibility into the business.

Achievements And Awards

Michelle is a big believer in going for industry and business awards. She encourages anyone who is doing well and excelling at what they do to employ this to help build their profile. Some of the awards and accolades that have been extended to Michelle include –

• **Westpac's Most Outstanding Business Women at the Northern Region Awards** in May 2011.

• **2010 Young Business Person of the Year Award in the Lord Mayor Business Awards**, which celebrates the achievements of businesses based in Brisbane. The awards judging panel paid tribute to Michelle for her success in building a strong business and her innovative and diverse thinking.

• **Finalist in the 2010 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Awards** (northern region) and was a finalist for the 2010 Brisbane Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award. She was the only female finalist in her category.

• In 2009, Michelle won the Young Business Women's Award at the 2009 Telstra Queensland Business Women's

Awards and was a finalist in the national awards. The judges were impressed how Michelle had turned her business (a one-woman-band operating out of Brisbane) into the national leader of VET PD services in Australia.

- Michelle was also a finalist in the 2009 Women in Business Awards, promoted through Queensland Business Review.

The Future - Social Media And Professional Development

When asked where she sees Velg Training in the next 5 years she commented "I believe we are well on our way to leading the Professional Development organisations in Australia. That's definitely been able to be supported that we had 830 people attend VELG conference for 2012 making it the largest conference for the VET sector in Australia for a number of years. The other would be the ability to spend a lot more time in social media and webinar development".

Family And Work Balance? – Get Help ☺

Both Michelle and her husband Matthew chose to have careers and a family so they set about creating a lifestyle that allowed them to come home and enjoy their family without the added stress of all that goes with working parents. They chose to have help at home with the

children and the house so they could have the lifestyle they wanted. Michelle doesn't see her work as a job, she loves what she does and she loves her children and that's what she is passionate about.

Final Words

When asked if she had any last words for this article, Michelle had this to say, "I guess my point is that – we should think about considering the VET Sector as an evolutionary one. One that works in steps of progression – morphing to adapt to the changing needs of learners, skills shortages, government funding and regulatory frameworks. One that must be delicately balanced with financial viability, sound business practices and the establishment of secure, dependable processes.

Sometimes I think people are forgetting why they become an RTO in the first place or become so overwhelmed by paperwork that miss the key feature – the learner."

NEW! ASSISTING WITH PERSONAL HYGIENE AND GROOMING DVD AND FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Funded by the Workplace English Language and Literacy Program (WELL), **Aspire Learning Resources** has developed a new DVD and Facilitator's Guide, which links directly to the CHC08 Community Services Training Package to support the delivery of:

- **CHCICS301A**
Provide support to meet personal care needs
- **CHCAC319A**
Provide support to people living with dementia
- **CHCDIS323A**
Contribute to skill development and maintenance



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