

Russell Burgess, Qantas - Podcast

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Interviewer: Welcome to the Real Skills for Real Careers Podcast. In this series we speak with some of Australia's most exciting global companies in fast growing industries. We sit down with leaders in human resources and training to get their advice on how to land a great job and successfully navigate a meaningful and rewarding career. We also learn what these organisations believe they need to be competitive for the future of work and the types of candidates that will help them achieve this.

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Interviewer: In this episode, we head out to a busy airport hanger at Sydney Airport. We chat to Russell, the Senior Coordinator of the Apprentice and Interns Program with Qantas Engineering. Russell has worked for Qantas for 40 years and in that time he's helped recruit and support thousands of apprentices through their career journeys, many who have gone on to lead large teams or become pilots or even heads of business.

Thanks so much for having us over to have a chat today. I've never been inside an airport hanger before, so this is pretty exciting. We know we're a little bit tight for time in here, so let's get straight into it. Russell, you're the Senior Coordinator of the Apprentice and Interns Program at Qantas Engineering. Can you tell us a little bit more about your own career journey with Qantas?

Russell: I started as an apprentice with Qantas in January of 1979. I worked as an aircraft maintenance engineer electronics, which is called avionics today. Electrical instrument radio, progressed through the trade, became a leading hand in charge of a crew of 12, doing maintenance on a wide range of Qantas aircraft. From there I moved into training, looking after apprentices in 1986. In 1989 I took over the management of the apprentice program, and I've been involved in the training coordination of training for apprentices, interns and upskilling of tradespeople since then.

Interviewer: That's a really long time working for the same company, you must really love it. Can you tell us a little bit about what you love about working for Qantas?

Russell: I think the greatest thing about the job I've got is that you recruit someone, bring them into the business with limited skills and then you see them at the end of four years where they graduate as a qualified aircraft maintenance engineer. And then you see them as they progress through their career, and with that they go on to become say a licenced aircraft maintenance engineer, taking on the responsibility for the maintenance on the aircraft. They go on to become pilots, they go on to

become managers, we actually have four heads of, which are heads of business units within the Qantas group, that are ex-apprentices. So the journey they can take is wide and varied within an organisation as large as Qantas.

Interviewer: So if someone wanted to apply to become an apprentice through the program, how would they go about it?

Russell: So we advertise through our website, candidates apply through the website. They complete some pre-screening questions. Based on those we then select people to do online aptitude tests. Based on the results from the online aptitude tests we bring people in for workshops, so they come in, we give them a presentation about the organisation. We do some group activities with them, and based on those activities we then cull, pick a group to come back for interview and progress from there.

Interviewer: So that sounds like a fairly competitive application process. How can a good candidate stand out?

Russell: What we're looking for with candidates is that they're very keen, they're interested, that they show enthusiasm for the job they've applied for, and that they're willing to learn. So they're probably the main things that we're looking for. Particularly for aviation, we're looking for people who are focused, who want a career. This really isn't a job. If you're looking for a job, go and do something else. With maintenance of aircraft, you really need a passion for the industry. You're going to do ongoing learning, you'll never stop learning about new technology, new aircraft entering. You look at the Boeing 787-900, the Dreamliner, that's a new era of aviation. So we need people who are adaptive, really flexible, willing to learn and are happy to get their hands dirty.

Interviewer: And so throughout this process, what would you place more importance on? Theoretical knowledge or practical skills?

Russell: We focus on hand skills. We really need someone who has a mechanical aptitude, because it is a trade. It's great to be the smartest person in the world, but if you can't use your hands, you're no good to us. We need a person that can look at the instructions, look at the drawings, transfer that information to their hands and carry out the maintenance on the aircraft.

Interviewer: I love that idea of looking at something and being able to transfer information to your hands. It's a great way to explain the skills required for more hands on roles. So if there was one piece of advice that you'd offer to people looking for a job at Qantas, what would you say to them?

Russell: Keep trying, don't give up. Those jobs are competitive, but just keep trying. If it's something you really want, if that's your dream, then follow the passion, just keep trying. Don't take a knockback the first time. Some of the people we see for apprenticeships who are successful, it's their third or fourth go at getting in. So if really that's your passion, follow the dream.

Interviewer: So what you're saying is to be resilient. What would be one piece of advice you'd give to parents who are wanting to support their kids during Year 12 and beyond that.

Russell: Well parents shouldn't be too focused on academic results in Year 12. What we're really focused on are people who want to enter into a trade and then once they've got their trade out of the way, people mature and learn at different rates. We have people who have done their apprenticeship have gone off to be pilots, they're captains. They go on to be managers within the business. They go on to quality assurance, they go into training. There's a whole range of different pathways. The High School Certificate in Year 12 is only one step in the pathway. It doesn't mean you can't succeed if you don't get great results in Year 12.

Interviewer: That's great advice, and a message we're slowly starting to hear more and more as we see successful people, entrepreneurs and C.E.O.s describing how the path they took was not necessarily standard nor linear. So once you offer a position to an apprentice, and assuming of course that they say yes, and they start working for Qantas Engineering, what does that then look like for them?

Russell: So once the apprentices start with us, they do their TAFE training, which is their Certificate IV in Aero Skills. We also supply specific training within the business unit, covering off the different aircraft types, the procedures and processes. At the end of their apprenticeship they'll continue to do ongoing training within the business. they can also choose to do a Diploma in Aircraft Maintenance and go on and become a licenced aircraft maintenance engineer if they wish. They'll then have to do specific aircraft type training that goes with it, and sit a series of examinations to become a licenced aircraft maintenance engineer to certify for the maintenance done on the aircraft, such as the A380. Ex-apprentices who have gone through their apprenticeship have the opportunity to apply for any vacancy that's advertised within the Qantas Group and it's quite common to see ex-apprentices in a range of roles. At the moment 35% of Engineering's executive team are ex-apprentices. We have seven captains, eleven first officers that are flying with the organisation. We have others that have gone on to be flight attendants. We've had people that have gone in to be heads of business units, and we've had people leave the organisation to go into senior roles in other companies as well.

Interviewer: So it sounds like there's really a lot of opportunities there for apprentice graduates. What do you think sets those high achievers apart?

Russell: People who progress through the apprenticeship who go on to higher levels within the organisation are motivated from day one. They're very passionate about the industry and they're very passionate about learning. So they take every opportunity that they can to learn off people within the business and also seek other learning external from the organisation as well. The best skills and attributes a person can have is an attention to detail. They really have to pay attention to detail. We can't call the R.M.A. at 30,000 feet, so every job they do, they have to be focused and committed to achieve the best outcome. Near enough is not good enough.

Interviewer: So attention to detail is key and something I'd argue is vital in a lot of workplaces, not just the more technical ones. Can you see that changing in the future? And what kind of skills do you think you'll be looking for in say five to ten years' time?

Russell: The differences between the trades mechanical and avionics is blurring. So we need a person who will be adaptive, can think mechanically but is also open to new technologies in the avionics electronics side. So they have to be adaptive going forward.

Interviewer: And how do you think the culture of workplaces will change into the future?

Russell: Workplace culture for the future will be a diverse working group. At the moment we're dominated predominantly by males, but we're encouraging more females to apply. There's no reason why a female can't excel in this industry the same as males do.

Interviewer: Well Russell, it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you today. It's definitely hands down the most unusual and noisy place we've recorded a podcast but also the most enjoyable.

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