





LINDSEY

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WATER AT GHD

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"We need diversity and inclusion in the water sector because innovation happens when we have different perspectives at the table"

Professional services firm GHD is committed to addressing the world's challenges in the areas of water, energy and communities, with innovative approaches that build resilience and sustainability.

The world is changing and the water industry with it: there are new roles and expectations, where water companies do not only have to provide water and wastewater services, but care for the environment and the wellbeing of the communities they serve, while reducing their carbon emissions and ensuring their services are resilient to disruptions. Innovation will be key to adapt and grow; in this interview, Lindsey Brown, Australian market Leader – Water at GHD, shares her views on innovation and how the water sector is adapting to change in Australia – the driest continent, experiencing volatile weather patterns – embracing new ways of thinking and anticipating risks.

Can you tell us briefly about your career path and your current role at GHD?

I came into the water industry from an atypical career path. Even though I steward an army of engineers and scientists now as GHD's Australian Market Leader for Water, I'm not one myself. I studied

public policy, then worked in the Canadian public service and the mining industry. After coming to Australia to do a Masters, I went into the Victorian public service with a focus on water and sustainability, then moved into a role at Melbourne Water. From there, I worked at a small consulting firm before starting my own consulting business, then moved into a role at GHD as the Victorian Market Leader – Water.

The golden thread that ties it all together is wanting to make a difference and knowing the power of the private sector to contribute to triple bottom line outcomes. Having worked in both the public and private sectors, I understand the roles that each play in decision making and the positive impact they can have on communities.

Now as GHD's Australian Market Leader – Water, my role is to guide our national business into the future, thinking of ways GHD can offer value to our clients for the next 90+ years and continuing to live our purpose to make water,

energy and urbanisation sustainable for generations to come.

When you hear the word innovation, most often technological solutions come to mind. What is innovation for you?

After the tumult of the last few years, innovation is no longer a 'nice-to-have'; it's an imperative. Innovation to me is about doing things differently in a way that unlocks value. It is a means to a particular end; never the end in itself. Innovation is about meeting a need, doing something better or solving a problem, whether it be reducing costs, lowering emissions or finding new ways to offer customer value. Sometimes that means innovation is technological or digital, but often it isn't. Being innovative means adopting new ways of thinking, applying existing ideas in a new way, inviting different processes or stakeholders, or combining the set of blocks we have to work with to create new things.

In my experience, one of the best pathways to innovation is to stay curious just a little bit longer. Often our desire for resolution causes us to jump to solutions or conclusions and grasp at the first or most obvious answer. If we can stay curious just that little bit longer (which sometimes requires humility), that's where we create space for innovation to emerge.

The needs that the water industry is expected to meet have evolved and broadened to address issues like the liveability of cities or climate unpredictability. To what extent do water sector organisations have the skills and culture to adapt to change?

In Australia, most organisations in the water industry have embraced the challenges of liveability and climate unpredictability. The Australian water sector sees itself as an enormous driver of community value, so they've been quick to take on the responsibility of responding to these issues to provide value to the community and continue to enjoy the license to operate. Because the indus-



try varies between large-scale water authorities and much smaller entities, the ability and capacity to respond to these challenges varies too. Despite this, it is widely accepted that the water industry plays a pivotal role in these key issues.

This shared sense of purpose and commitment is what helps the water industry attract and retain people who connect with this vision, people who are committed to delivering these outcomes and inspired to make a difference. That's something that other sectors struggle with and when we're competing for talent, the water sector is able to differentiate itself through its collective commitment to achieving positive outcomes. This helps us attract people with the skills, mindset and interest to tackle these challenges head on.

Are there lessons that can be learned from other sectors in terms of creating the conditions that favour innovation?

It's great to see the water sector take an interest in learning from each other but there is more we can learn from other sectors when it comes to agility in decision making and having the risk appetite to make bold moves. Those are things we as an industry could improve on.

Other sectors or organisations with different regulatory frameworks or organisational structures might have an edge over us but it's critical that we don't use that as an excuse. We need to explore ways to be more agile and bold because I expect we will be disrupted at some point. Take banking, for instance: 50 years ago we would never have thought an industry so established and central to our economy could be disrupted, but then came cryptocurrency and a digital revolution. To assume that the water industry won't be similarly disrupted leaves us in a vulnerable position, so we need to think innovatively around our future and not be complacent that we will always play the role that we play now.

The power industry is often looked to for inspiration because it's seen as being analogous to the water industry – both highly network driven essential services and highly regulated. But if we want to innovate, we need to take cues from sectors that are less like us – think tech, banking and social enterprise. If we look too narrowly for inspiration, we limit our ideas. The scale and importance of the problems we're trying to solve require us to be unlimited in our thinking.

The resilience of water and wastewater services relies on a healthy environment. Communicating with customers is also part of a utility's concerns. Is there a trend towards a more holistic approach to water services provision?

In Australia, there's a trend towards thinking more holistically about the role of water services and how they're provided, with examples of integrated entities responsible for both waterway

health as well as water and wastewater service provision. The next evolution for the water industry is around stormwater and its value as a potential resource. Our thinking has evolved over the last few decades around wastewater as a risk to be managed rather than a resource to be captured. Similarly, our thinking around stormwater will evolve too and we may see changes with how that ties into our responsibilities around the water cycle rather than being seen as something separate.

Currently, the way water is governed does not match with the natural water cycle, and we're seeing the limitations of regulatory and governance structures that don't match with the natural system. Floodwater and stormwater are managed differently to potable water and wastewater, but it's all part of the same cycle. How we manage either of those can affect the quality of the other. We have seen a willingness to collaborate across borders and boundaries to manage water in a more holistic way, and while that's a key step, there's so much more we can do to improve.

Rather than approaching water projects with a mentality of zero harm to the environment, we need to go further and regenerate the environments that have been impacted. In a water industry that loves concrete and pipes, we are starting to see more regenerative design and nature-based solutions emerge. Many are leaning into an exploration of what regenerative solutions might look like at scale and their potential.

Climate ambitions are on the rise. Is there enough emphasis on the links between climate and water?

Within the water industry, there is a deep understanding of the connection between climate and water, both as managers of surface water resources – which are susceptible to climate change – and as large greenhouse gas emitting energy users. Most water utilities in Australia have emissions reduction tar-



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gets and a majority have net zero targets. The commitment is there because we are seeing first-hand the impacts of climate change through flooding and droughts on an unprecedented scale. The next step is to help the community and private sector outside the water industry understand the connection between climate and water, empowering people to make decisions that are more sensitive to that connection.

The recent Aquanomics report released by GHD quantifies the impact of climate-related events on Australia's economy between now and 2050. It's an important piece of work because it demonstrates the interconnection between climate and water in an explicit way. However, despite our best attempts to quantify the financial and economic impact, we cannot put a price on the psychological and emotional impact on communities affected by climate-related events. In the end, water utilities exist to serve their communities so it's important that we shine a light on these issues and the impact they have on people.

What trends would you like to see in the water industry in the coming years?

We've seen a lot of progress in the last few years around diversity and inclu-

sion in the Australian water sector, with growing conversations around women in executive leadership, inclusion for people with diverse abilities or disabilities (such as through the WaterAble network), LGBTQIA+ inclusion (through the Pride in Water network) and bringing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples voices into the water sector. But we can do so much more to change the face of the water industry.

My hope is that our industry will look visibly different and be more representative of the diverse communities that we serve. We need diversity and inclusion in the water sector because innovation happens when we have different perspectives at the table. If we're going to drive innovation that serves our customers and our communities, we need people in organisations who look like our community and reflect their views.

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