

Building a Better Community

With a focus on local communities and building complex and sustainable infrastructure, Abergeldie is constructing foundations for Australia's future.

Images by Scott Ehler

Abergeldie has been a sustainable and successful stalwart of the Australian construction industry since it was first established by its founder and managing director, Michael Boyle, in 1994. Over the years, Abergeldie has developed a reputation for designing and constructing complex and innovative infrastructure works.

Abergeldie's team of civil engineering professionals utilise leading-edge construction technologies to design and develop complex electrical, marine, rail, tunnel, and wastewater infrastructure, as well as road and bridge construction projects for public and private enterprises.

At the heart of everything Abergeldie does is the company's intense desire to build strong communities. Each staff member understands that the bridges and vital infrastructure works they painstakingly undertake help Australians connect with one another and their communities.

Abergeldie's dam-construction work includes some of the most complex, award-winning water-storage and upgrade projects, with the Civil Contractors Federation repeatedly recognising the exceptional work

that Abergeldie completes. Abergeldie is also responsible for rail-associated infrastructure such as access and platform upgrades, overpass bridges, and civil works in Queensland and New South Wales, all built with little disruption to ongoing rail operations.

Additionally, Abergeldie annually designs and builds temporary bridges, barriers, and fences for sporting and recreation events, including the Telstra Sydney 500 V8 Supercar race.

Abergeldie is designing and developing the framework for all sectors of Australian life. As founder and managing director, Michael Boyle understands the importance of Abergeldie's role in laying the firm foundations for Australia's growth. *The CEO Magazine* spoke to Michael about how he and his team are working to ensure that this growth, both for Australia and Abergeldie, is savvy and sustainable.

The CEO Magazine: What is your professional background leading up to establishing Abergeldie?

Michael: I'm a civil engineer, and I studied at Sydney University. During and after university, I worked with major civil contractors in Australia like Thiess, Costain,

White Industries, and Dillinghams. I worked with those different contractors for around 15 years and moved through different types of projects all over Australia, Scotland, and the UK. Finally, around 20 years ago, I established Abergeldie.

What have been some of the greatest challenges you've faced as you've grown Abergeldie?

Every now and again, you'll have a project where things don't happen the way you expect them to happen. Therefore, the greatest challenges have usually been things not going as expected on a project. We've overcome those challenges by putting a lot of management effort into them and involving the client on the way through. It's just about keeping the client fully informed and working through to resolve the situation as quickly and as cheaply as possible.

When you say 'keeping the client informed', is there a lot of back and forth between you and your clients?

I think it's a matter of keeping them fully informed. They may have to pay you to sort the problems out. You're there to complete a project; but if it's not progressing as originally planned, then it's important that the client knows >



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influence on me has been, apart from the belief that you have to delegate responsibility to the workforce as much as possible. We want people making decisions as close to the workforce as we can.

Do you use a lot of training methods and a rigorous recruitment process to ensure you get the proactive, decision-making people that you need?

I don't know whether it's as methodical as that, but I know the sort of people that we want. I know them when I see them. It's these core people that we build the business around.

As your company works in a variety of engineering and infrastructure subsectors, how have you managed to unify the vision and direction of the business?

We build the complex infrastructure needed to build a better community. The focus is on carrying out complex projects. That's how we unify the vision, making sure that we're only focusing on the more difficult projects.

How does your organisation collaborate with suppliers and other strategic partners to achieve success?

We try to build long-term relationships with our key suppliers, subcontractors, and design companies so that we understand each other. It's just about being open and honest between the parties, and really I think the biggest way you can show that is by paying on time. We make it a point to pay on time and be very transparent with our partners.

How do you communicate with these important long-term partners?

There are lots of meetings and lots of phone calls. There are people on >

what you're doing and how you're going to get it back on track.

Starting your own business and growing it can obviously be extremely stressful and all-consuming. Do you have a work-life balance?

It was very hard to do in the first 10 or so years after I started the business. I must admit that these things are a team effort. My wife worked in the business initially and we were very lucky that we worked well together. That was extremely critical, certainly in the first five or six years of the business, maybe even in the first 10 years. Sometimes these things are lucky. You don't know how they work so well, but they do.

It was a shared goal, so it was a bit easier to balance it. Now, we've got more people around, so it's a lot easier for me to get the balance right, or near enough anyway. It's hard to get it right every day. I'm more strategic and I work more on where the business is going rather than what the business is doing day to day. There's still plenty to do because we're still growing.

There's a good team of people who are building things for Abergeldie. Initially, I was working very closely

on what we were doing day to day as well as where we were going as a business.

You've received a host of accolades and awards. What do you attribute this recognition and your success to?

It's always about good people. Everybody talks to the client, so you need a happy client to win any awards. It's very hard to win an award if your client isn't happy. Good people get the job done well, keep the client fully informed, and bring the client on the journey with us. At the end of the day, if you've got a happy client, then you're doing a good job. You've got to deliver what the client wants.

So it's about keeping the client happy and, as a consequence, generating that good word of mouth?

You've got to do the good work first, and then the client's happy!

Who or what have been your biggest influences in terms of your management and leadership style?

I don't know whether I could pinpoint what the biggest

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- Michael Boyle



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different levels who communicate regularly; we have multilevel connections with our key partners. There will be multilevel linkages and conversations going on between these people, and I think that is really crucial.

Things are dealt with day to day usually with no problems. If a problem develops, it gets elevated and we get involved at the senior level and get it sorted out because it's important for both organisations.

What are some of the vital components that go into developing strong relationships with suppliers?

We rely on suppliers to deliver to our clients, so they need to know what our clients require. We need to communicate to them, they need to deliver it to the client, and we need to pay them on time. That's basically it.

In regard to keeping them up to date with the client's needs, do you give your suppliers an overview of the project to provide them with a better idea of what they're supposed to be doing?

Yes. We work with suppliers and partners to try and let them know what's really important. We encourage our suppliers to come to us with ideas and different ways of doing things. We analyse those ideas and work with them if we think it's a good idea that could benefit our client.

Are there any notable projects that you've worked on that you're particularly proud of?

There have been lots over the years, but the four significant projects that we've won awards for this year are good on lots of levels. It's not easy to win awards, and they're also very diverse projects. It gives a good idea of the range of

size and the range of complexity of projects that we do.

One is the Lucinda Bulk Sugar Terminal where we upgraded, repaired, and restrengthened the wharf, which was damaged by Cyclone Yasi. There was also a significant time pressure with that project as it had to be completed so they could get the sugar harvest out to port. The Civil Contractors Federation gave that project two awards: Construction Excellence in Queensland and the overall National Construction Excellence in 2013.

We did a ventilation shaft out of the Ulan West underground mine, so we were able to deliver a shaft on a tight time frame without anybody heading into the shaft during the whole process. The Civil Contractors Federation recognised that work in the New South Wales Construction Excellence category and gave us an award. Then, we won Contract

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- Michael Boyle

Miner of the Year at the Australian Mining Prospect Awards in 2013.

We also built a bridge at Burrinjuck Dam as an access upgrade project, which was a very difficult physical site, so to deliver that safely was a significant achievement. The Civil Contractors Federation gave us a Construction Excellence Award for that project in the New South Wales category.

We did a project up in Queensland to replace a bridge which was damaged during the floods. The Redbank Creek Bridge was a significant project for us, and, in recognition of our hard work, the Civil Contractors Federation named us winner in the Queensland Construction Excellence category in 2013.

They're all very geographically diverse, from Townsville down to south of Yass, and they're various sizes and types, but they're all complex and they all ended up being high-quality jobs that were delivered safely and on time.

Those projects are also a testament to your company and the standards you set, aren't they?

Yes, that's right. We definitely don't want to do anything of poor quality. There are other overall philosophies that Abergeldie holds at its core. I'm a board member of Sustainable Businesses Australia, so being environmentally friendly and sustainable are important passions for me and the rest of the company. We have that whole philosophy of building a better community, which runs into that focus on the environment. It also runs into Abergeldie as a company donating a percentage of its turnover every year to a number of charities.

Which charities do you support?

We support the St Vincent de Paul Society's Vinnies Van, which is an extremely important initiative. The Abergeldie-sponsored 'free food, drink, and chat' van helps the homeless in Parramatta and



Penrith, Sydney. Many of our staff regularly volunteer their time, and, as CEO, I frequently participate in the annual Vinnies CEO Sleepout.

In the Queensland floods, we directly assisted families and businesses, providing manpower and equipment to help with the sandbagging and clean-up. It was an effective way to help, based on our skills and equipment. We are always committed to helping communities, especially those that have had the misfortune of natural disasters.

We also support WaterAid, which is a charity supported by the Australian water industry that supplies toilets and taps to third-world countries. We support beyondblue annually instead of giving client gifts at Christmas. And we support Oxfam and have had teams in Sydney and Brisbane complete the Oxfam 100-kilometre Trailwalker events.

For you, it's not just about being environmentally friendly but about being efficient; right?

Yes. I think it makes sense on all levels. What we're trying to do, in everything we do, is undertake and complete things more efficiently—not just in a financial sense, but also being efficient in the way we use the world's resources. In lots of instances, it makes good financial sense, but sometimes it doesn't. It's about thinking not just

in a financial sense, but in a holistic sense as well. We're trying to build a better world, not just build structures and make money.

What does the future hold for Abergeldie?

I think Abergeldie will continue to grow. We've got a good team, and that team will build on what we have achieved to date. We'll grow, and, over time, we'll become a major contractor carrying out complex infrastructure in Australia.

What are some key strategies that you'll implement to continue that growth?

We're continuously doing that. We just keep looking ahead, establishing the systems and procedures, and positioning the people that we need to do it, which we have been doing at the moment. Over the past year or two, we've upgraded our financial systems, we've improved our management systems, and we've recruited some key people, so we've got the framework in place to be three times the size we are now.

We've taken the opportunity over the past year or two to put in place everything we need to be able to grow because that's what we expect to do. It's all about risk management; you've got to have the systems in place before you need them. •



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