

C O R P O R A T E C I T I Z E N S H I P

BEON'S

SOLAR POWER

LIGHTS UP LIVES

Beon Energy Solutions' projects in the Australian towns of Hughenden and Karadoc execute a business strategy that builds workforce capacity, delivers high-quality projects - and transforms communities.



uch has been made of the power of renewable energy to slow down the pace of change in the global climate. However, two solar power projects are rapidly transforming communities - in a good way - in two Australian towns. When Beon Energy Solutions under Victoria Power Networks, a member company of CK Infrastructure Holdings Limited, commits to a project, it commits to a community, the people and their lives.

Australia is a fantastically successful country by all accounts of human development. Uniquely among developed nations, it has not had a recession for over 27 years. However, no country has created a perfect society and so some people need more help than others. By making community development an integral part of their expansion plan, Beon's efforts to help those people have been good business sense that makes a long-term impact in communities, families, and individual lives.

Hughenden, Queensland, and Mildura, Victoria, are two towns hosting Beon projects. The Beon philosophy is to ensure that local communities benefit from new projects in their area. Rather than importing goods and labour that flood in and then out again, Beon seeks to collaborate with local institutions to spread project development benefits to the entire community. Their experience holds lessons for companies working in remote and semi-remote areas around the world.

SUNSHINY BUSINESS

Beon specialises in complete management and installation of large and small renewable energy and electrical infrastructure projects. From financing and design to construction and implementation, they have worked with utilities on more than A\$3 billion worth of projects to deliver high-quality solutions including energy generation, transmission, substations and distribution.

In the two towns in Queensland and Victoria (see map), Beon has been contracted by BayWa r.e. Solar Pte., a German renewable energy company, to deliver complete and ready-for-business solar power operations. The second collaboration between Beon and BayWa r.e. is the Karadoc Solar Farm in the Victorian town of Mildura, about 400 km east of Adelaide and 600 km north-northeast of Melbourne. But the first collaboration was outside the small town of Hughenden in the Shire of Flinders in the middle of Queensland.

HUGHENDEN, QUEENSLAND

Hughenden is not the bustling Sydney that served as the backdrop for movies like *The Matrix* and *Mission Impossible 2*, nor does it project the laid-back surfer vibe of Australia's Gold Coast. It is a small town of just over 1,100 souls, a 16-hour drive north and inland from Brisbane. Even the next 'big city', the modest city of Townsville (population approximately 178,000) is a four-hour drive away. Hughenden's main landmark is the Muttaborrasaurus - a replica of a dinosaur whose bones were discovered not far from Hughenden.

Located in the Shire of Flinders, it has an abundance of sunshine and flat, relatively affordable, land with access to the Ergon Energy grid. These key factors made it an attractive place to establish the 20 MW Hughenden Solar Park. But it was the construction that made all the difference to the community of Hughenden.

The Beon philosophy is to ensure that local communities benefit from new projects.

When Beon looked at the local talent and business base, they saw there were skill shortages that needed to be addressed to allow it to ramp-up for the construction of the high-tech solar farm. It had two choices. One was to pay to import all the labour, supplies and equipment to make the construction happen. Instead, it chose another direction - to commit to training local workers and to sourcing from local businesses to make the project a reality.

Beon committed early to developing local staff. General Manager Glen Thomson explained that they weren't just going to build a new solar energy farm, but also "generate regional investment and jobs" in the area.

The project was going to need about 100 staff working full time. Beon set about seeing how it could make use of the local, often long-term unemployed, workforce.



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Many people hadn't finished high school and some couldn't even complete a form to apply for a job. Beon worked with a local organisation, Rainbow Gateway, which helped people with limited reading and writing skills to complete the forms. It also trained them in basic construction skills so they could perform entry level construction.

The work was tough - 10-hour outdoor shifts, sometimes in 40°C weather - but the employees took to it with ardour. Many received on-the-job training in construction and sometimes machinery skills, including crane driving. Risk assessment and safety training was also key to keeping staff safe. Some were able to get the training and hours necessary to become licensed so they could go on to work in other locations.

Beon embraces the Hughenden spirit and heritage by joining the 135-year-old Hughenden Agricultural Show.



FIRST NATIONS, FIRST CHOICE

Working with the local Aboriginal population was also key to securing community support - and top-quality workers. There was a smoking ceremony with local leaders where Beon was welcomed to the historical lands of the Aboriginal peoples. When the project was at maximum staffing of around 100 people on site, the fully employed workforce included 25 Aboriginal employees, or 25% of the total.

The rest of the community was not neglected. Beon participated in local events like the Hughenden Agricultural Show, a local 135-year-old institution. In addition to explaining and promoting the project and recruiting staff, it gave away the hit toy of the summer, the fidget spinner, to local kids.

LOCAL BUSINESS BOOM

In addition to the 60 locals employed on the project, Beon also committed to sourcing from local businesses. The need for some imported labour saw them build camps on the local showgrounds, contributing to the local economy.

Sometimes the volume of work proved challenging to local businesses and Beon did what it could to accommodate smaller operations. For example, the local catering supplier struggled to maintain food supplies for such a large workforce when normal payment terms stretched out to 30 days or more. Beon worked with the supplier to shorten the payment schedule to seven days, and to dramatically improve the diet for their hard-working labour force.

SMALL PROJECT, BIG IMPACT

The 20 MW project installed 68,000 solar panels, enough to power 6,500 homes.



While small by energy project standards, it had a big impact on the community. Many long-term unemployed found themselves back at work with all the benefits that implied for the community.

Many who had little to no experience got a toehold in the construction industry and even became licensed. Some who had their 'ticket' (i.e. licence) were able to get the hours needed to become fully qualified, and went on to work at other projects in the region, like the Kennedy Energy Park, also in the Shire of Flinders. People who came in at entry level, like former nurse Jonathon, aka "Big Jon", moved up to become supervisors based on their excellent work.

Some even packed their bags and headed south to work on a much bigger Beon project - the 112 MW Karadoc Solar Farm in faraway Mildura.

KNOCK KNOCK, HELLO KARADOC!

Over 1,500 km south as the drone flies (but over 2,200 km to drive), is the town of Mildura. At 27 times the population of Hughenden, it may seem a veritable metropolis - but is still a modest town of 30,000. Including surrounding areas, its population may top 60,000. A major citrus, grape and wine-producing region, it is still hours away from big cities like Melbourne and Adelaide.

Armed with its experience from Hughenden and the confidence of partner BayWa r.e., Beon set out to see how it could use the local workforce, including those who traditionally had a difficult time securing full-time work to support their families.

The much bigger project needed many more people for the commencement of a

second project with BayWa r.e., More staff needed to be hired to build a facility with over five times the electricity generating capacity of the Hughenden Solar Park. The Karadoc Solar Farm would have 348,000 solar panels generating over 112 MW of energy to supply power to, among other things, the Carlton & United Brewery operations.

Once again, Beon committed to hiring local residents, including newly arrived refugees, people on community-based orders and others recently released from prison, as well as the long-term unemployed.

NEW COUNTRY, NEW CHANCE WITH BEON

As in many countries, refugees face multiple hurdles in the workforce on top of the normal challenges faced by locals. Language, poverty (normally arriving with nothing), and a lack of cultural understanding and connections are all barriers to securing gainful employment. Murtaza (his last name withheld for safety reasons) faced all those challenges - but found a home with Beon.

Murtaza's family fled Afghanistan when he was 14. His father was accepted into Australia as a refugee through the UN refugee programme. But it was another three years before all his paperwork was completed, allowing Murtaza, his mother and three younger siblings to join him. Tragically, four weeks before they landed in Australia, Murtaza's father drowned in Albury.

They still went ahead with their move to Mildura and, in spite of all the difficulties and challenges, Murtaza graduated from high school. With a family to support,

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Murtaza,
Beon employee

university was not an option. He secured work on the Karadoc project and did so well that Beon offered him an electrical apprenticeship - a chance to gain qualifications and earn a higher salary to support his family. He welcomed it with gusto.

"He has been one of the standout apprentices," says electrical site manager Ben Williams. "He's a role model in the way he just puts his head down and works and always turns up. Murtaza is awesome and we would have him on any project, any day."

Murtaza aims to use his new income to support his siblings to do what he couldn't - go to university. He's also bridging cultures between refugee communities and native-born Australians. "I ... met a lot of people, learned more about Australian culture. And I think they have learned a bit about mine," he says. "People look at me now not as a refugee, but as a workmate, and some, I hope, as a friend."

“Engage early!”

Glen Thomson,
Managing Director, Beon

LOCAL PARTNERSHIP

Other refugees are coming to the project through the Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council (SMECC), an organisation that helps refugees, mostly Afghans and Burundians, adapt to Australia – including finding work. It isn't the only organisation Beon works with.

The Mildura Regional City Council's Employment Program collaborates with the Victorian State Government's Jobs Victoria Employment Network programme to identify suitable candidates that face long-term barriers to employment. It not only flags them for hiring, but provides ongoing support after they start working.

Another partnership is with the Victorian State Department of Justice and Regulation. They have helped to match former prisoners on 'correction orders' with work opportunities at the Karadoc Solar Farm.

Denis Pana, manager of Beon's mechanical installation crew, says "We here at Beon are all for giving people a second chance. We have all made mistakes in life but out here on the farm, everyone is treated equally and treated the same. It's been great to see these guys ... turn their lives around."

One example is Trevor (name changed). After his wife died of breast cancer, leaving him to care for his seven-year-old son, Trevor succumbed to deep depression. Poor life decisions saw him end up going to

jail for 18 months, losing his son. Two years after his release he was still unemployed, burdened by his criminal record.

But after joining Beon, Trevor proved his worth and got his life back on track. Steady employment meant a steady income – and reconciliation with his son. He explains, "Being given a second chance by people who have shown confidence in me has done wonders ... I only have to worry about the most important thing in my life right now. My son."

SUNNY TIMES THROUGH SUNITAFE

Beon knew that working with the Department of Justice and SMECC, and bringing some people from Hughenden was good and necessary – but was not enough. It also wanted a way to make a longer-term contribution to the local community by training young people to work not just on the Karadoc Solar Farm, but also by giving them the skills to continue working in the burgeoning solar industry. They approached the local technical college, Sunraysia Institute of Technical and Further Education (SuniTAFE), to create a new course.

The six-month Solar Industry Career Pathway programme would see participants not only learn and receive an income, but also receive their Certificate II in Electrotechnology (Career Start). The programme included four weeks paid off-site training at Mildura SuniTAFE.

Australian recruitment agency Chandler Macleod managed the onsite hiring, including students from the SuniTAFE programme. Glen Thomson, Managing Director of Beon, identified the novelty of the programme, saying "We believe this programme is a first for the region, and possibly the state, and is definitely a win for everybody – SuniTAFE, the industry and, most importantly, the trainees."

In addition to the trainee programme, Beon, in partnership with SuniTAFE and Southern Mallee Group Training, also developed an electrical apprenticeship programme. This resulted in 25 young people from the Mildura region taking up an electrical apprenticeship which has set them on the pathway to becoming qualified electricians, simultaneously addressing a serious skill shortage in the region. Six of these apprentices are Aboriginal, including one Aboriginal woman. The benefits of this programme will flow into the local community well beyond the life of the project.

Recruits from refugee communities, like Murtaza (below), have an opportunity to upgrade their skills and their lives while building bridges between local Australians and newer arrivals.





Victorian Energy Minister Lily D'Ambrosio meets with local apprentices at Karadoc Solar Farm.

Chandler Macleod also ran a one-week pre-employment training programme to bring new workers up to speed on skills needed, and over 100 employees came via this programme.

When the project is finished, many will have a chance to find work in the sunny nation's rapid growing solar energy sector. Says Mr Thomson, "This initiative is about investing in the long-term future of the renewable energy industry."

These collaborations have built goodwill at the local and state level. Mildura Mayor Cr Mark Eckel says, "What has been striking has been the efforts of Beon Energy Solutions to ensure that locals benefit from this project both in terms of employment opportunities and the provision of local goods and services."

He continues, "... more than 90 of these workers were long-term unemployed and faced barriers to employment that Beon assisted them to overcome." He appreciates the diversity in the workforce and notes that Beon "having employed over 30 Aboriginal workers and people from many different cultural backgrounds ... should be seen as a model for future solar farms wishing to operate in our region."

Victoria's Energy, Environment and Climate Change Minister Lily D'Ambrosio visited the construction site and was keen on the environmental contribution, saying "The Karadoc Solar Farm is a great example of a renewable energy project delivering cleaner energy, local jobs and economic growth."






ADVICE

When moving in and running a large project in a remote community, it may seem easier to just ship in your regular suppliers and ship them out again, isolating them from the local community until the job is done. But Mr Thomson thinks others can learn from the Beon experience. When asked, he advises others to "Engage early!"

He claims it will save money in the long term and secure local community support. Taking the time to understand local stakeholders' needs and conducting a thorough stakeholder mapping can lead to deeper understanding that sees projects succeed - and helps sustain a legacy of a better trained, more experienced, financially and socially richer community.

Beon has taken this approach and it has paid off, not only in successful projects that earn business partners' respect and government support, but also in enriched lives for refugees, the long-term unemployed, rehabilitated prisoners and everyone in their families who depends on them.

The solar panels at Hughenden and Karadoc may light up thousands of homes and businesses, but the Beon approach to local development has lit up the lives of individuals, families and whole communities with the big heart it brings to business. □

LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE TO GROW	HUGHENDEN SOLAR PARK Hughenden, Queensland	KARADOC SOLAR PARK Mildura, Victoria
Population 	1,100+	60,000
PEOPLE		
Full time staff* (local hires) 	100 (60)	280 (200)
POWER		
Solar panels 	68,000	348,000
Generation capacity 	20 MW	112 MW
Homes energised 	6,500	110,000

*At peak employment