

Reader Postcard

Tech Writing in the Outback

by Rhonda Bracey

“Are you available to work in Kalgoorlie for 2 to 3 weeks?” With that question, my technical writing life leapt in a different direction from all previous experiences.

Kalgoorlie is one of Western Australia’s larger country towns, with a population of 30,000 people. Western Australia is 1 million square miles in size (it could hold 5 states the size of Texas), with a total population of less than 2 million people. About 1.5 million of them live in Perth, reputed to be the world’s most remote capital city. Kalgoorlie is in the heart of the goldfields, almost in the middle of the state, and a 6- to 8-hour drive from Perth. We’re talking red earth and desert — the Aussie Outback.

Having recently worked on the 36th floor of a skyscraper in the heart of Perth, wearing the requisite corporate “uniform,” my immediate, though minor (and female), concern was with clothes — I didn’t have anything that would suit the site where the work was located. My next concern was with the nature of the work — I hadn’t worked directly in the mining industry. And lastly, there was the logistics of working for a few weeks on a mine site, some 600 km away from my home and partner.

The clothing issue was sorted out quickly. The “corporate uniform” on-site was desert khaki trousers, long-sleeved shirts, and work boots; skirts, stockings, and high heels were shoved to the back of the wardrobe.

Work-wise, the initial brief was to update the training manuals; the day-to-day operation of the plant varied somewhat from the original design, and it was my job to work with the on-site personnel to get the content right. Formatting wasn’t an issue: content was king. No special tools were required, *PowerPoint* and *Word* were the only software packages to be used (the plant was too much in its infancy to have considered alternative methods of presenting its training information). The company’s prime objective was to get the plant working, then operating at target production capacity.

The last consideration was the logistics of living in Kalgoorlie and working on-site. The deal was a good one. The company would fly me to Kalgoorlie early every Monday morning; pay for a taxi from the airport to the site; pay for my accommodation at a 4-star motel; pay for all meals; take me to and from the site on a site bus every day (6 a.m. out, 5 p.m. back); and fly me back to Perth every Friday evening to spend the weekend at home. And they would pay me an hourly rate.

So I figured “Why not?” I had been out on my own as a contractor for just over 6 months, and every contract was precious. If it also included travel and a chance to try something different from documenting software, then it had to be a bonus for my own life experience and for my résumé. My partner was encouraging and envious.

Three months later I was still commuting to Kalgoorlie. The initial job of updating the 50+ training modules was complete, and I was now involved in writing/ updating more than 200 “Best Operating Procedures.” One of the skills I developed was SME (subject matter expert) interviewing.

In some cases, getting information was like pulling teeth. In most cases, the Process Technicians (the field personnel, the ones who get their hands dirty) I worked with were very forthcoming with their information, even though they quite often forgot critical steps because the process was so familiar to them. As an outsider, I was able to ask the “newbie” questions and I used my ignorance of all things to do with refining processes to my advantage in extracting the exact steps required. In a few instances, the already documented information either didn’t

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Aerial view of the mining and refining site out of Kalgoorlie. Mine workings are on the left; refining plant in the center; tailings ponds and evaporation dams to the right. Note the greenness of the desert.

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Rhonda Bracey; sunrise on-site

make sense or seemed to be missing some obvious steps, so “playing dumb” was a good way to get some critical pieces of information. Unlike software documentation, in this industry if you miss a critical step or don’t list the appropriate protection for a hazard, lives could be in danger and/or the company could be sued for negligence.

So what experiences have I had, and what impressions have I taken from my time in the desert?

The company I worked for was mining laterite nickel and cobalt, processing it using pressure acid leaching, then refining it — all in the middle of the desert. The resulting product (nickel sheets and cobalt sulfide cake) was transported via road trains to Kalgoorlie, loaded into sea containers, taken by road to Perth, and then sent by ship to customers around the world.

The areas I worked with were predominantly leaching and refining, with some work done with maintenance, the chemical laboratory, and the paramedics. I learned an enormous amount about nickel and cobalt; all sorts of acids, reagents, chemicals, and reactions; pumps and valves; pressure and temperature in an autoclave; electrowinning, anodes, and cathodes; and safety hazards and personal protective equipment to be worn when working in specific areas. One of the most revealing aspects was the recall of 2 years of high school chemistry information. All that knowledge I thought I’d never use (let alone remember) came flooding back, and made my understanding of what I was documenting much easier.

Mining, one of Western Australia’s biggest industries, is no longer the almost totally male-dominated industry it was even 15 years ago. Of the 180 site personnel, about 15% were women, and not all of them worked in traditional administrative roles; there are or have been female geologists, metallurgists, process engineers, mining engineers, and leaching superintendents. There is still a long way to go, but inroads have definitely been made. However, it is still a young industry; most of the site personnel and many of the managers were under 40.

Aside from work, daily life on-site was quite different from what I’d imagined. Unlike many other mine sites in Western Australia, especially those commissioned in the 1960s and 1970s, no one lived on-site or in a specially built town close by. The bus for the day workers left Kalgoorlie early in the morning, taking an hour to get to the site some 60 kms (about 40 miles) away, about 20 km of which is on dirt road. As it was winter, the sun didn’t come up until about 6:30 a.m., and, for Australia, it was cold (about 3°C).

The daily trip to and from site was fascinating, and most staff missed it because they used the time to sleep. The landscape, while officially classed as desert, was lush and green, covered in small trees and full of life. Cyclones (hurricanes) that crossed Western Australia’s northern region earlier in the year dumped huge quantities of rain on the inland, and so everything was growing like weeds. And that included the wildlife. I saw kangaroos (mostly as road kill, unfortunately), adolescent emus (3 walked

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Trees of the desert, mostly eucalyptus.

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across the car park one day as I was waiting at the printer), feral goats, wedge-tail eagles, and all sorts of other birds. Sunrise each day was brilliant, almost every day the skies were clear, and in 3 months it only rained for about 3 days. And as the land was so flat, the blue sky filled every bit of space. Because it was winter, the temperature only reached about 20°C maximum (approx. 65°-70°F).

The air was crisp and clean, even though the stack venting steam from the autoclave could mislead you. The leaching and refining circuit was surprisingly well-enclosed; almost everything was recycled back into the process, and very little waste product was emitted. Many years of world-wide environmental action have resulted in a very clean mining industry, which has clear guidelines for recycling waste, eliminating pollution, and rehabilitating the land.

The site had its own power house, water supply, paramedics (with ambulance), and had telephone, Internet, and mobile (cell) phone access to the rest of the world. It didn't have a cafeteria but there were microwaves, vending machines, tea and coffee facilities, BBQs, picnic tables, and crib rooms. You either brought your lunch or had it delivered from a bush pub (hotel) about 15 km away, paying less than you would in the city for a comparable sandwich, including the delivery.

By the time the bus headed back to Kalgoorlie at 5 p.m., the sun was starting to sink. This time of the day was even better than sunrise. The golden light from the setting sun shone off the tree trunks and the new green shoots, making them glisten. Add to that the deep blue sky and patches of red earth and it was a color explosion. Sadly, nearly all the workers were sleeping, missing this daily spectacle.

On Fridays, when I flew back to Perth, I arrived at the airport way before normal check-in time. It was here that my airline club membership came in very handy. This was an expense I've paid over the past few years, sometimes wondering why. Now I know. The spin-offs from the regular contact with other commuters at such a small airport (everybody is on the same flight) were very beneficial. I exchanged business cards on numerous occasions as we chatted over a glass of



wine in the club lounge or waited in line to board the plane, and discussed future work opportunities with a number of companies. The airport lounge was fertile ground for marketing myself and my tech writing services.

If you ever get the opportunity to do something a little away from the ordinary, but are unsure, my advice would be to go for it. The quantum leap I took into an industry I knew very little about has been good for me in all sorts of ways: intellectually, socially, and professionally. I now have experience to draw on which may suit a future client, and I no longer skim over advertisements that state "mining industry experience essential." And as a bonus, my partner appreciates me a lot more! ❖