

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF CAN DO

Charlotte Roseby talks to Scott Dowsett, Director of
Cooke & Dowsett, about his 20 years in the family business.

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There was no question what Scott would be when he grew up. Plumbing is in his blood. His father is the original “Dowsett” in plumbing firm Cooke & Dowsett. Of his five uncles, three are plumbers. After working alongside his father on the family farm, Scott left school at 16 to become a plumbing apprentice in his father’s business.

Once he finished his apprenticeship – in a typical bit of teenage rebellion – Scott left his dad’s business to do his own thing and started Scott Dowsett Plumbing. He was kept busy with residential and commercial sewer connections when his home town of Riddells Creek came online. He then began doing larger commercial jobs like sewerage Mt Dandenong Tourist Park and a Lilydale school, which led him away from Riddells Creek for months at a time.

Scott has now come full circle and, after joining with Chad Cooke (yes, the son of the original Cooke in his dad’s company – they are practically cousins), they now run the second generation of Cooke & Dowsett. “History is certainly repeating itself,” says Scott.

Cooke & Dowsett is now larger than anything Scott’s father might have imagined. They are now one of Australia’s leading commercial and industrial plumbing companies, with over 280 fulltime employees and offices in four states.

Their past and present job list runs to more than 400 projects. They range from commercial warehouse stores requiring just three plumbers, through to high-intensity, fifty-storey residential towers and major industrial projects. Projects in recent years include constructing a complete hydraulics package for the 5-Green-Star Goods Shed in Docklands, and sending plumbers to China to certify and test the plumbing installation on transportable buildings being built for the BHP Billiton’s proposed township in Port Headland. They have worked on hospitals, airports, prisons, performing arts centres and hotels.

The Cooke & Dowsett headquarters in Keilor Park now include 2000 square metres of factory and 2000 square metres of hardstand. It’s a far cry from the rented office in the small Victorian town of Riddells Creek that Scott shared with his dad.

Did Scott always have a dream this big? Not at all, it turns out. “I’ve never had a business plan that described this,” says Scott. “Every year, for 20 years, we have doubled our sales.”

It happened that way, laughs Scott, because he can’t say no. Clients keep having good ideas and suggesting interesting and challenging projects. “I’ve just always been a ‘can-do’ man and this is a ‘can-do’ company. I’ve never said no to anybody.” Plumbers in China? No problem. Vanuatu? Sure.

Sometimes the project happens because one of his employees just needs it, says Scott. “We once had 30 plumbers working on a project in Lorne on the Great Ocean Road. Our foreman ‘met a lady’ and wanted to stay there. So we needed to find some work for him to keep him busy. We now employ the most plumbers in the Geelong region.”

“We were in WA doing a few Bunnings stores. We were going to come back home ... but ... five years later we have 120 employees over there. We now have 60 plumbers doing fly-in fly-out work in the resource sector.”

Favourite projects? It’s hard to pick, says Scott. “Each one of them takes me somewhere.”

Like Vanuatu, it seems. A Cooke & Dowsett team joined a Melbourne builder to plumb a new resort on Irriki Island – a tiny island off the coast of Port Villa in Vanuatu. The project included training and supervising the local labour, and getting plumbing industry certification.

The construction of this resort had its challenges, says Scott. “It was remote from the remote! We had to get our materials carried to the island by ferry. But being able to teach the locals was really something.”

Back home, one of Scott’s favourites is the Victorian Desalination Plant in Wonthaggi – the largest desalination plant in Australia and one of the largest infrastructure projects in Victoria’s history. The plant will be one of the greenest in the world, using the most energy-efficient method of desalinating water.

“The Desal plant is an amazing project. Really, it doesn’t get enough praise. It is an absolute engineering feat,” says Scott.

The plant is designed to deliver up to 150 billion litres of fresh drinking water per year. The initial production capacity means the desalination plant will be capable of supplying about one third of Melbourne’s annual water needs.

Cooke & Dowsett were commissioned to supply and install a full hydraulics work package, including site establishment, potable water, sewer, storm water, irrigation and fire service systems. The complex scope of works required 46 of their plumbers onsite, as well as project managers, draftspeople, administrators and designers working behind the scenes.



They've just won the last project in the desalination process: loading 55,000 membranes into the cylinders. It's outside the general scope of plumbing, says Scott, but they're able to manage it.

"Our guys are working so hard. The number of hours is huge. It means staying away from your family, staying away from home, working 12 hours a day 7 days a week, living with your workmates. That has taken its toll. It's like working in the mines; it's not for everybody."

What makes everyone happy though, is the enthusiastic feedback Scott has received from the builder, Thiess, for their work on the project. "They recognise our work ethic and our commitment to the cause," says Scott.

"This project is really a shining light for plumbing. It's great for our industry."

Another shining light for plumbing must be Scott's involvement in training young Indigenous plumbers. Cooke & Dowsett have now trained 20 Indigenous apprentices in Victoria and one of their apprentices, Jeremiah Green, won the Master Plumbers' Indigenous Apprentice Award last year. A Nyikina-Mangala man, Jeremiah now plans to return to his community in the Kimberly and start his own plumbing business and train his own apprentices. Scott is justly proud.

"I'm very passionate about this. Seeing a young Indigenous person grow, and then to secure them for permanent work, is incredibly rewarding."

But a chance conversation with a Plumbers Union secretary one afternoon in a Perth airport lounge led to Scott's most ambitious project yet: to create a not-for-profit plumbing company to benefit Indigenous communities.

Cooke & Dowsett joined the Victorian Plumbers Union, the Nirrumuk Aboriginal Corp (an Indigenous employment and training organisation) and the Jarlmadangah Burru Aboriginal Corp (an Indigenous community in the Kimberly) to create NUDJ Plumbing in Broome.

NUDJ provides vital plumbing services to remote and non-remote communities in the Broome and wider Kimberly region, improving sanitation and water management. But, it has an even more important aim. By providing plumbing apprenticeships to Indigenous people from rural and remote communities, NUDJ provides vital opportunities.

"We want to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians through training, mentoring and personal development," says Scott. NUDJ also aims to break down social barriers and heighten cultural awareness in the wider community.

It's been a remarkable success but it hasn't been without its challenges, says Scott – particularly as they get no funding or support for their mentoring program. "It's hard to make a business work in a big city like Melbourne, but being remote in Broome makes it extra hard."

Bret Sheehan, Manager of NUDJ in Broome, describes it this way: "A lot of our work is up on the Dampier Peninsular at two Aboriginal communities, Ardyaloon and Djarindjin. The road to these jobs consists of 150 kilometres of made road and, in the middle of all this, is 99 kilometres of unmade dirt road – and I use the term 'road' loosely. During the wet season the road can be closed for a week at a time as it turns into a river and makes getting to work impossible."

Despite working in some of Australia's most remote places, NUDJ has finished a string of successful plumbing projects in town residences, businesses, community housing, remote schools, outstations, TAFEs and airports.

"Now when they come out of their training they've got something to go on with," says Scott. "Hopefully, one day we can sail off into the sunset and leave them with a company they can own and operate themselves."

Scott clearly cares about every single person in his very large team. He likes to think of it as a family business, he says, albeit one with 280 members.

"My people have been my best investment. Essentially, we've built this business for our people – not just for myself."

Scott says his loyalty has been more than returned. "No-one has left our fold. No-one. The very first plumber I put on is still with us. My very first apprentice – I put on 20 years ago – is still with me today. He's now a senior estimator."

Scott's dedication to the plumbing industry has recently been rewarded with an appointment as Vice-President of the Master Plumbers Association: "To be honest, I was very proud to be offered the opportunity. I am as keen as the rest of the board members to ensure we lead in good corporate governance for the rest of the members."

Scott says he has always viewed the Master Plumbers as a very important partner for business because of its industry association and networks.

"I strongly believe the Master Plumbers is underrated, and possibly under-used, within the industry. If you utilise all, or even some, of the services offered by the Master Plumbers, it is a very worthwhile and cost-effective membership – training, industrial relations advice, legal advice, apprentice hire, industry updates and all-out networking with like-minded tradespeople."

Speaking of networking, it's Scott Dowsett's 20th year of trading this year and he and business partner Chadd Cooke celebrated in August, inviting all their past clients, builders, associates, and apprentices.

"Chadd and I both happen to have two sons each, so you never know what the future may bring," laughs Scott.

COOKE & DOWSETT: PROJECT SNAPSHOT

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- > Irriki Resort, Vanuatu
- > BHP Billiton, China



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