

MEET THE BOSS

JODIE HAWKES Chief Financial Officer, Bowhill Engineering



JEREMY HAWKES MD & JODIE HAWKES CFO



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Bowhill is a small town on the banks of the River Murray 45 minutes' drive from Murray Bridge.

Based there is Bowhill Engineering, a family business that in 40 years has become a specialist in heavy and complex structural steel fabrication and a major source of employment for the Murraylands. It takes on at least one apprentice a year, and at the moment has six metal fabrication apprentices and one business administration trainee.

Boweng (its abbreviated name) employs 38 staff and is currently working on several national projects including four road/rail bridges in three states. It has worked on ferries for the River Murray and done multiple projects for defence and mining industries. Clients include McConnell Dowell, Lendlease, Laing O'Rourke and Fulton Hogan.

Current owners of the second-generation business are Jeremy Hawkes the Managing Director, and his wife Jodie, the Chief Financial Officer. Brendon and Averi Hawkes, the founders of Boweng, retired as directors in 2016 but remain involved as board members.

Three non-executive directors sit on an advisory council that meets quarterly to oversee the business plan, providing accountability, support and guidance on the strategic direction of the business. Jodie described the business structure as

an onion of many layers, always reviewing and strengthening systems, policies and procedures.

"This is what makes it compliant in such a highly regulated industry," she said. "You can't fake this stuff or make it up as you go; the depth to our compliance structure is what sets us apart and makes us favourable to our clients, and it makes us easy to deal with."

"The leadership team meets fortnightly, to help us stay focused 'on' the business, rather than 'in' the business. We set 90-day forward plans and hold each other accountable to achieving these. It's not always easy, but so long as we have the big-picture forward vision front of mind, we know we are on the right track."

FINDING RECRUITS

Jodie said finding high-performing, experienced metal fabricators has been tough, especially due to Boweng's remote location. "We realised that our best and brightest staff were those who started as apprentices and were trained in our culture, systems and procedures," she said.

"Thus, we realised early on, the importance of supporting our industry by ensuring we contribute to the pool of qualified metal

fabricators. Even though we've taken on at least one apprentice a year for the past 20 or so years, it hasn't always been easy finding and attracting the right staff. This has dramatically changed in recent years due to our multi-focused approach managed wonderfully by our HR Coordinator, Samantha Krollig, who has been with us 12 years."

That approach involves speakers in schools, careers expos, presentations and mock interviews, and school tours through Boweng. Vacancies are advertised in all local school newsletters. Work experience is encouraged and is a prerequisite to a student winning an apprenticeship. Around six work experience students a year are taken on.

Apprentices are buddied and have external mentorship via Australian Industry Group (Ai Group) assistance. Boweng's Facebook is used to promote its culture. "We love it when we profile a staff member and get a huge positive response from their friends and family," Jodie said.

She joined Boweng 17 years ago. Her first-born daughter, Casey, was then just six months old. "We received a phone call that changed our lives forever. Jeremy's brother, Simon, aged 30, had died instantly in a car accident. I went to work with Jeremy on the Monday to support him.

"He stood there in front of our 12 staff and told them he would do everything possible to ensure they still had a job. We both had no idea how. From that day I've been by his side, supporting the family business in any way I can. It really is remarkable how our differing skill sets are so complementary.

"Together we make a strong and determined team. My underlying determination is to ensure we are here for the long term. I'm lucky that my passion and strength lie with systems and procedures. I'm not risk averse, but I do search out what our biggest risk factors may be and do my utmost to address and minimise these.

"This year's innovation was removing our reliance on our IT server. We now operate 100 per cent in the cloud with multiple-integrated software. I can't say it's been easy or smooth, but the benefits of being able to work from anywhere, anytime are immense. We can show our 3D model to our clients, mark up drawings in the workshop, and submit photos or timesheets off-site."

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Jodie said everything she does is based on a system and procedure. "Some may think this limits innovation, but I strongly disagree. We joke about the revision number of some of our documents that can be as high as 500. This means that whenever we find an issue or see a better way to do something, we tweak our existing procedure.

"I like to work alongside all staff and see how the best operators do their role. I firmly believe there is no 'A' team, that we all have the opportunity and right to learn from the best. I've learned a lot in 15 years of reading contracts and have created a checklist for things that need to be checked and reviewed. This IP future-proofs our business; new staff can be trained to do the same."

A SURPRISE STATISTIC

Recent research found Boweng employs the same percentage of people in manufacturing in the Mid Murray Council area as Holden did in Adelaide's northern suburbs at the time of the closure announcement. "We were blown away by this statistic – it sounds very impressive," Jodie said.

"It came from a consultant we employed to help us with a grant application. We are extremely proud of our Purpose that was developed jointly by Jeremy and myself and it remains as relevant today as the day we created it. The key elements are Security for Staff/Family; Work Life Balance; Help Our Community Thrive.

"For us, it is not about profit, it is about sustainability and making a difference to our local community. It's also about regional pride and showing kids that there are great opportunities in our region."

In the past 15 years, Boweng has won 19 awards spanning business, training, safety and industry at state and national level. This year it was inducted into the Family Business Australia Hall of Fame; named Regional Showcase Awards Business Winner, and was a Telstra Large Business SA finalist.

Boweng's growth has been limited by an inability to expand its workshops due to an overhead powerline. A \$1 million expansion project now underway with state and federal funding is due for completion in June 2020. It will underground the powerline, upgrade

the power supply and provide 100kw solar to Boweng, 24kw solar to Bowhill General Store and 13.5kw with Tesla battery backup to Bowhill Community Centre.

Summing up, Jodie said: "I am 100 per cent happy, enjoy my challenging role and am strongly passionate about my work. I encourage and support women in industry and children finding their life's work within their region. As a mother of three girls and a boy, a small business owner and active member of our regional community, there is never a quiet or dull moment.

"There's the ability to make a difference, to see the journey of staff from school leavers to leadership positions, to train staff and support them in both their personal and career goals, to help them gain formal qualifications, but mostly the joy of hearing them say they are proud of Bowhill Engineering as their employer.

"We are proactive in wanting to continue our business to the third generation and have started our succession planning with the creation of a family charter. As our kids are still relatively young, we will develop and refine this over the next few years. We would love for our kids to be involved, but it's neither a requirement nor entitlement – positions will need to be earned."

Written by John Satterley

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