

9th October 2020

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To: Leaders that care about human resource management of caves and karst sites throughout Australasia

Re: Short Term Contracts – Our recommendation

Introduction

The use of short-term contracts in the tourism sector, especially those managing caves and karst have long been an issue in retaining staff or at the very least in providing fairness and equality for all staff who work in caves and karst. We raise the following points with you for consideration and further deliberation on human resources policy.

This subject of short-term contracts will likely resonate with public sector cave sites and private sector businesses. The hours of work are part-time. In off-seasons when there are fewer visitors so demand for guided tours is lower and guides work, fewer hours. The opposite occurs in peak times, school and public holidays particularly, when guides often work full time+ hours. Flexibility on both employers and employees is essential. Short term contracts only add to uncertainty for the employee.

Covid-19 lockdowns brought the casualised employment tenure of cave guides to the fore. As Covid-19 kicked in and sites shut down it became apparent that cave guides on short term contracts and the casualisation of the workplace created a need for employees to reassess their position. One cave site in NSW had three resignations in a week during this time as staff reconsidered their future.

In the Covid-19 situation Australian state government employed cave guides on short term contracts were not entitled to Job Keeper. Cave guides with second jobs had some income trickling in. The application process for Job Seeker proved to be a minefield and some guides have had to access their superannuation to survive. Long term, this will be a disadvantage to those people as their retirement income will be less.

Types of Employment Contracts

We understand that the type of employment contract that can be offered to guides is contingent on the types of contract administered by an entity. Examples include:

- Casual, part or fulltime, maximum 12-months, no right of renewal.
- Permanent part-time, three to five years, no right of renewal.
- Fulltime, three to five years, may have right of renewal.

It is important to satisfy the needs of both employers and employees. Without the commitment either way, good staff often find other secure work and the renewal process occurs all over again and again which is costly to the employer as it takes time for new staff to learn the in-depth aspects of a cave site.

The Case for Security of Tenure

AMBASSADORS FOR YOUR BUSINESS

Cave guides are the front-face of the entity for whom they work, a crucial part of its commercial success. They have strong interpersonal skills, engage with, entertain and inform customers. They must have or develop skills and abilities outside of many 'normal' jobs. They must be capable and adaptable to deal with a myriad of ages, stages and interests of visitors. They are responsible for safety, monitoring customers throughout a tour to ensure their well-being. Work Health and Safety knowledge is an essential competency. Guides take action when necessary to ensure their own and visitor/s safety.

RETENTION OF STAFF SAVES MONEY

The cost of hiring and training staff is considerable. It can cost between \$3000 and \$10000 per person - costs start at the time a decision is made to employ. A position description (PD) may need to be developed or reviewed. Steps then include advertising, selecting an interview panel, choosing candidates to interview, hiring or arranging a room, maybe paying full or partial costs of bringing candidates in. After interviewing and choosing the preferred candidate the decision is written-up, referees are contacted, the job is offered/accepted. The appointment is made, the new person arrives on site. Induction occurs, training begins. Uniforms are purchased.

For sites that have 'extra layers' e.g., unique geology, hydrology, chemistry, paleontology or key fauna such as microbats, it is not uncommon that it takes several months of exposure to scientific research outcomes to learn enough to comprehensively / authoritatively interpret all the site's values. The value of training over those months is considerable.

LOYALTY AND MOTIVATION

The benefits to an employer of highly motivated and loyal staff are significant - morale tends to be high, staff respect and appreciate each other which creates a good atmosphere which is noticed by customers.

SECURE TENURE - EXAMPLE FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

1. A new guide is hired on a 12-month casual contract with the same sick and annual leave percentage per hourly rate as at present. If at the end of 12-months good performance is proven and funding is available, they are then offered a five-year contract, which is typically set out as a 3 plus 2.
2. The five-year contract would have conditions as per usual longer-term contracts - sick, annual and other leave provisions (paternal, maternity, bereavement). At the end of a five-year contract the offer can be made for another five years based on performance.
3. There are 'base' hours with flexibility to increase by agreement between the parties.
4. Annual Performance Reviews and Development (PRDs) ensure a high standard of service is maintained and quality staff retained. All contracts have clauses to terminate if performance is not up to scratch.
5. Part Time positions should be explored more often by employers when they need regular staff to work a few days each week. A Part Time position would have the same sick, annual and other leave provisions (paternal, maternity, bereavement) as a permanent team member. Not on a contract but a determined minimum number of hours, with the expectation additional hours would be available, by agreement between the parties. This assists the employer in peak times as well as boosts the number of hours annually for the employee. Most importantly it provides security to both the employer in keeping valued staff and the employee has job security to plan a life based on secure employment.

Post-Covid-19

- The job scene will likely be different and security of tenure may take a higher priority for some people than it has in the past.
- Cave guides are likely to look for more secure positions. Many had to when their work stopped during Covid-19 shutdown and they were unable to qualify for government support.

- Managers of cave sites will review how many visitors can be taken on tour and the tour timetable will be restructured. Considerations will involve available space determining the new carrying capacity on each tour, the perceived new market demand and the available staff to carry out daily duties including tours.

Caves which have been developed to enable the average person to visit and experience their natural wonder play an important role in the tourism sector. These places need very experienced staff to protect these special sites and safely guide the public as well as properly inform them of the environment they are viewing. Being a cave guide involves many skills and if done well looks like – well a walk through a cave. These skilled people deserve secure employment. Please use your position and leadership skills to create more secure employment to this very skilled tourism sector. Tourist cave sites give a purpose for people to travel, to stay, eat and play and contribute to the myriad of associated services in each of their local communities.

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Cave Animal of the Year

Cave Animal of the Year 2021

What will it be?

Production of our Australian Cave Animal of the Year materials is now in process and we will launch our 2021 effort at the ASF Council Meeting on 10 January 2021.

Our exciting 2021 materials will be available after the launch date.

Please get ready to support our 2021 efforts for cave animals and place your orders for posters, bookmarks, stickers and cups at: hello@caveanimaloftheyear.org.au

www.caveanimaloftheyear.org.au

Above image courtesy: Editor, Caves Australia

2019

Tasmanian Cave Spider

Hickmania troglodytes



Image by Garry K Smith

2020

Australian cave crickets

Rhaphidophoridae



Photo by Garry K Smith