Dodgy training abolished but skills gap remains

THE AUSTRALIAN REFRIGERATION Council (ARC) has been working with the training industry regulator Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) to stamp out sub-standard training.

Technicians had been complaining for years about how these short courses had led to inferior workmanship that was damaging the trade.

In the ARC's latest 2018/19 annual report, board chair Michael Bennett, said short training courses have almost been wiped out. When they do appear, he said ARC is quick to take action.

According to the annual report there were 96,803 Refrigerant Handling Licences (RHL) and Refrigerant Trading Authorisations (RTA) issued by ARC at the end of the 2018/19 financial year.

This includes 76,654 licences for individual technicians and 20,149 authorisations for individual businesses.

"Under ARC's management the licence scheme has gone from strength to strength - now numbering over 95,000 licences and authorisations," Bennett said.

"Underpinning this growth has been a number of value-add initiatives we have delivered including the Green Scheme accreditation scheme for low GWP refrigerants."

In addition to visiting technicians, businesses and trainers throughout Australia, ARC responds to over 1,200 phone calls per week.

"We try to keep licence processing times to a minimum so technicians can get back to work as quickly as possible - 70 per cent of completed applications are issued the next day," Bennett said.

"ARC activities resulted in over 24.37 megatones of CO2 equivalent direct emission savings."

ARC CEO, Glenn Evans, said another important initiative completed by ARC this year was the development of the VU22583 unit of competency which is now nationally recognised.

"We are encouraging employers to ensure their staff are appropriately trained when working on refrigeration and air conditioning equipment containing A2L refrigerants," Evans said.

"With R32 now used in 53 per cent of all pre-charged small air conditioning units imported to Australia it is important technicians are trained to handle this refrigerant."

Speaking at CCN Live 2019, Bennett said Australian technicians will be routinely working with flammable refrigerants which is why A2L training is so critical.

"Close to 75% of the installed base will be mildly flammable in 10 years time," he said.

By the time training was introduced in mid-2019 Australian technicians had already installed over a million air conditioning units with R32.

Despite the high number of technicians that will be handling class A2/A2L flammable refrigerants in coming years very few have formal training.

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The Superior Training Centre (STC) which provides training in A2/A2L refrigerants said that although a formal unit of competency is now available there is still a serious skills gap.

STC's head teacher in refrigeration and air conditioning, Peter McQueen, said only 60 technicians have completed training since it was introduced in June, 2019.

"It is a pretty dismal figure because safety should be a priority," McQueen said.

Refrigerants Australia executive director, Greg Picker, said the initial focus should be on the current workforce.

"We have 70,000 people in need of training, we need to be more pro-active," he said.