



09 The Unique Benefits of Working and Living in a Regional Town with Matt O'Neill

TRANSCRIPTION

Brett Cribb: Hi, my name is Brett Cribb, managing director and founder of Resources Unearthed. Welcome to Resourceful: Stories From The Site. Today I'm joined by Matt O'Neill. I've known Matt for over 20 years, of which time he's progressed through various leadership positions at Mount Isa to where he is now as Chief Operating Officer at Glencore North Queensland Copper Assets. The operation spreads throughout Townsville, Cloncurry, Mount Isa, and Cobar. To say it might be complex is an underestimate. I'm looking forward to hearing Matt's stories from the site. Wherever you are, sit back, relax and enjoy this episode of Resourceful. Welcome Matt, and thanks for joining us.

Matt O'Neill: No problems. Thanks, Brett, thanks for having me.

Brett: Excellent. Matt, maybe to begin with, could you tell us a bit about how and where you started in the mining and resources industry?

Matt: Yes, no problems at all. That's a long time ago. I grew up in Mount Isa, so I was exposed to the mining industry almost from day one at school. My first entrance into the resources industry was actually in the mines in Mount Isa as a Boilermaker's trades assistant in the lead smelter. I can certainly say that that was one of the most unique experiences I think you could hope to have especially way back then. If ever you needed a motivation to go back and study, then that was certainly it.

Brett: [laughs] It would have been interesting in the smelter being the Boilermaker's assistant.

Matt: Yes, through summer in Mount Isa and in full PPE and that was horrific. Having grown up there as I said, I went back to university, did mechanical engineering with the full intent of not working in Mount Isa again, which I think happens to a lot of local kids at Mount Isa. I went and did work in the construction industry. I worked through Brisbane, Melbourne, a lot in Sydney, overseas in Asia and then in America for a few years. Then I ended up in a job in Melbourne which I was quite enjoying. I started a consulting business and was partners in the consulting business with a couple of other guys.

Mum and Dad were still in Mount Isa, and Dad's been in the resources industry for a long time. Then Mum was sick. Mum had cancer and it was the third time around. We thought that maybe this was a time to go and spend some time with family. All of us, both my brothers and myself went back to Mount Isa with a plan of being there for a few years. The story could obviously end poorly but the story ends quite well. Mum's happily retired down on Bribie Island with Dad, and both brothers are happily back in Brisbane on the southeast corner. I'm now in Mount Isa married with four kids. I was the one that stuck there.

To be honest, it's been the greatest thing that could have ever happened to me because of what was happening in Melbourne, and I think even the person I was becoming in Melbourne wasn't me. There was a whole range of things that were driving that. To come back and go back to grassroots and be happy with what you're doing, it's been the greatest thing ever. We're really happy where we are. It couldn't have worked out better for us.

Brett: Certainly. You had a fair bit of history with Mount Isa with your Dad there who I've worked with once before as well over the years.

Matt: To be honest, that was probably one of the key drivers for not wanting to come back to start with this. I wanted to try and make my own way rather than always be Terry's son, which would have been the case if I'd gone back to Mount Isa.

Brett: That's right, from day one.

Matt: Yes, that's exactly right.

Brett: Matt, can you tell us a bit more then about how you've progressed in your career to where you are now, and the skill sets maybe that you think led to that position?

Matt: Yes, I've gone from in the resources industry starting as a mechanical engineer at probably George Fisher, and even a couple of other mine sites previously as a consultant through now to the Chief Operating Officer role. Even in recent time learning how that interacts with our key investors. Glencore obviously owns the North Queensland operations, but the last probably 12 months, really had a lot to do with those guys as well. How that started for me was in the skill set, I think that's helped is really around people management and being able to relate to people.

A lot of the projects through the mechanical engineering side were driving contractors on-site and being able to actually achieve the outcomes. There's obviously contractual arrangements that sit there. I suppose I found if you use the contractual arrangements, things didn't tend to work out quite that well, so it was more around how do you actually both work together to achieve the outcome? Obviously, contractors have to make money. We have to get the project done within the time frame and the budgets that we wanted.

That skill set of being able to negotiate and come to an arrangement that suited all parties, I think has probably been the key one that's allowed me to progress through. I've gone through the engineering side of the business into the production side of the business, then into the maintenance side of the business. Then moved into management all over probably the last 15 years, which is what I've been up in Mount Isa for now.

Brett: It was interesting, you talk about working with groups to get a common goal or get an outcome. Is there something maybe you could expand on some of that?

Matt: Probably the key one that I work on or the principle I work on most there is the most is the important thing that you have as somebody's supervisor or as the supervisor

of whatever's going on to give them is actually your time. Taking the time to listen to what they've got to say and their thoughts, and actually listening not just hearing what's said, but thinking about what they're saying and providing some feedback as to why you may or may not take on their advice. I think that's been probably the founding principle that stood me in good stead. I see a lot of people listening to what's being told to them by the people that work for them, but not really actually hearing what they're saying.

They spend the time and then move on and not really give it a second thought. I think that that ability to actually understand what's being said, ask a couple of questions, think through the process and then respond. I know that all sounds pretty basic, but to be honest, that's probably the key one that's stood me in good stead. Then the other one's also to not be afraid to actually disagree with what's been said but to have reasons as to why you disagree. Not just, "No, you don't do it that way because I'm the boss." I think that's probably the worst answer I've ever heard out of anyone who had supervised me.

Brett: I couldn't work that way, yeah.

Matt: It doesn't work very well for me either. The answer is, "No, I don't necessarily agree with you. These are the reasons why and look, you may or may not be right, but unfortunately, I'm your supervisor today so we're going to do it this way." I think that's really been probably the underlying thing that's helped me along the way.

Brett: It's always a challenge of management, isn't it?

Matt: It is.

Brett: That sort of stuff and listening to people and actually making sure they understand why you're making a decision and working with them to get an outcome.

Matt: That's exactly right. All the textbooks have plenty of stories around how you do it, but it's actually a skill set that I see a lot of leaders don't have. Or lose probably, to be honest, that had to get into the position, then by the time they get to a more senior position, they forget that that's what got them there.

Brett: Matt, I think it's clear you've come from a mechanical background. How did that interest in leadership and management evolve for you and get you interested and want to pursue that further?

Matt: I always had an interest in the management side of operations. That was how I ended up in the consulting business back in Melbourne. What I did to try and build on that was I went and did an MBA a long time ago now. I'm not going to give that away but did that quite some time ago.

Brett: I think I can count the years Matt, it's okay.

Matt: [laughs] Yes, that's right. That really gave me the ticket into the game realistically. Then do all the learning on the job after that. It was really just like a degree. You get into the game and then you learn how to actually do it through your experience. That's evolved really from the various leaders that I've had. I've had some really good leaders



that I've worked for. I've had some really bad leaders that I've worked for. Whether it's politically correct or not, I think I've learned more from the bad leaders.

I've learned how not to do things, and I've seen a range of people do things that I've vowed never to do if I ever get into the position where I'm in that role. Remembering that and making sure that that's an underlying foundation as to how you lead, I think it's been really important for me. Then the other one, and the real reason why I enjoy some of the leadership roles more often than not, not all of it, but is that you have an ability to influence the outcome.

You do have an ability to influence the outcome of not just the organization that you're working for, but if you pick where I'm working today in Mount Isa, you have such a big impact on the community that it's really quite fulfilling in that sense knowing that the community is highly reliant on the operations that we're running. That really does, I suppose, keep me energized with what's going on and keep me motivated to make sure that we're doing it as well as we can.

Brett: Yes, certainly not just Mount Isa, no doubt. It's Townsville, and places like Cobar, and Cloncurry and all that.

Matt: That's right. Then there's the further afield it goes near you. Townsville is a key one, understanding what's going on there now today. The influence that happens in northwest Queensland from Cloncurry and Mount Isa is really important. And like you said, Cobar as well. Having been associated or looking at that site now, the similarities are striking between Cobar and Mount Isa in terms of the reliance on the community, the reliance that they have on the mining operations there, and even just all of the things that the community expects from a resources business to actually do. They're all very, very similar. It's quite interesting to see.

Brett: Could you tell us a bit about a difficult or interesting time in your career including any advice you might pass on to your younger self?

Matt: Probably the most difficult time in my career was when I transitioned from the consulting business in Melbourne, back into the mining industry. I suppose the process of dissolving the partnership, letting people know that I was headed back and as far as away from the industry. Also the fact that I think I gave around six-months' worth of notice that that was how it was going to work. All the learnings that I got out of that, the experience wasn't pleasant.

The people I worked with, I don't think necessarily acted in good faith.

The learnings that I had from that, really the advice I'd love someone to have given me was to not take that all personally. It was a lot of money for me at the time. I was just paid all that I had. I ended up losing pretty much most of that through that process. What it did to me personally really was probably the hardest part of that. The money's not necessarily an important factor, but the self-esteem, the fact that I took most of that personally really sort of put me into a place where I wasn't overly comfortable. The advice there is really around don't take that personally. It's something that happens in



business, but also to make sure you've always got a way or an exit strategy or a clear way of resolving conflict and differences of opinion because that was something I went into that arrangement without having done that.

The exit strategy or the way in which we would sort of finish or leave the business wasn't clearly defined at the beginning. If I was to go into partnerships again on any sort of venture, regardless of whether I think the person's a friend or otherwise to really clearly define if something doesn't work out how are we going to finish this off. Then also, it's not personal. It really is business, it's just how that works but that was something that I suppose I learned through that experience and use that now.

Brett: Exit strategy is always an important thing in business, knowing what they are. It's not an easy thing to do when you're with the view that you're getting together and putting a group of people together that, "We're going to plan what the exit is."

Matt: That's right. It's an uncomfortable conversation, isn't it?

Brett: Well, it can be but it can also be yeah, with help, it's not too bad. It's interesting.

Matt: No, it's one best had without emotion-

Brett: Exactly yeah, and at that stage, most people can do it without the emotion because you're all thinking it's going to work.

Matt: It's a theoretical conversation rather than this is really happening.

Brett: Yeah, very good. Do you have any key values and practices that work for you that you'd be willing to share with our audience? You spoke about listening to people and things. Is there anything else in that area that you think could assist people to listen and understand working with the team and conveying decisions, those sorts of things that you were talking about?

Matt: The other one that I work on there is really around sort of openness and transparency. Actually telling the truth, not trying to make the story sound either more politically correct or smarter or whatever it happens to be is that this is how I see the situation. These are the inputs or the information that I have today and so, therefore, this is what we're thinking and where we're headed. It all sounds really easy to say sitting in a boardroom or sitting somewhere else, but when you actually go out onto the site and you're talking to people about what's happening, whether it's an injury or fatality or whether it's a business decision that's been made, being honest about why you've made that decision I find tends to work quite well.

I know it also tends to get me into a bit of trouble on occasions because the further you go through, there are some things that are not necessarily secret but aren't easily explained and complex outcomes. Trying to get through, that's often difficult on occasions but being as honest as you can is probably the key one for me. I think that came back to something that someone once told me where if you can look in the mirror and be happy with the person you're looking at, then you're probably pretty successful



regardless of what role you've got and where you are is making sure that you are comfortable with the outcomes and you're actually doing what you think is right.

Brett: One of the things we've explored over quite a few of these podcasts is mentors. People like Richard Moreland and Ian Goodwin have spoken about the value of mentors. Is that something you see has been useful to you along the way?

Matt: Yes, it has been. Although I must say I've thought about this question often because I've not had one person as a mentor along the way. I've had a variety of people depending on either the situation or the time. Probably the starting point for me, the key one was I was fortunate to have a dad that's quite senior within the organisations and industry and did provide significant help and assistance in terms of being able to deal with different things. I've always had that personal mentor to go back to and bounce things off.

Then along the way, I've had a range of really good supervisors and otherwise that have helped me out with that. I have found that important, but I've also found that I haven't really stuck to one mentor all the way through. I've changed depending on the situation I've found myself in and that's helped me a lot I think.

Brett: Yes, I think that that's certainly a common theme of what they've all talked about is it's not just one mentor. There's a group of people that you may well call on over time to assist you in the really tough decisions or really development stages or whatever they might be along your career.

Matt: Yes. Or even someone just to support. I know we went through a period where a lot of people were leaving the business because we had to downsize and then we had some incidents where we had a fatality. Those are the sorts of times where you really feel isolated and on your own and to be able to pick the phone up and just bounce it off someone and say, "Hey, this is what's going on. This is how I feel." They might not even offer you advice. They might just sympathize, but that's been really valuable for me.

Brett: So are there any other tips or guidance you'd give to someone in your position or probably, more importantly, your younger self?

Matt: I think the best advice that I give to some of the people coming through the industry now is to actually do the job you're doing now really well and look to enjoy the job you're doing today. Don't worry about the next job, that will take care of itself if you're actually doing the one that you're in now well. I see a lot of people coming through sort of today always with one eye on what's next and with a view of where their career is intending on going.

I think that that shows so when you can really see that as their supervisor or even further afield, you can see the people that are doing a really good job in the role they're doing today. With a little bit more ability they're obviously able to do the next role whereas you can also see the ones that aren't really that interested in what they're doing today. They're more interested in the next job and I think that that doesn't help. It's more a case of enjoying what you're doing today, have a rough idea of a plan, but just



do what you're doing today well because I know that's sort of what I've followed through and it didn't-- I never had a plan to be here.

How it's happened has really just been opportunities have come up so that advice-- and it wasn't something that someone ever said, but that advice of just doing today well, tomorrow will take care of itself is really the key one for me.

Brett: Yes. I think many of our interviewees that we've spoken to along the way have said similar things in that opportunities just kept opening up for them if they were doing what they were doing well and enjoyed what they're doing. I've talked a bit about the hedgehog theory in previous podcasts around working on the things that you enjoy doing and the things you like doing and the things that you're good at and finding what they are and working towards them all the time.

If you're not in a place where you're not enjoying what you're doing then and you won't enjoy everything you're doing-

Matt: Yeah it's the 80% rule there

Brett: That's right. Where you're not enjoying it, then perhaps you'd better ask yourself whether you're in the right place.

Matt: Yes, that's exactly right and that's so important with what people do. The 80% rule I think is important too because there's always parts of your job and parts of your day to day activities that you wish didn't happen. Being focused on them I think a lot of times people focus on those rather than the other 80% which is the good part.

Brett: Yes, that's right. What's your most memorable or funniest site story?

Matt: Probably my most memorable one that springs to mind was actually a termination or a show cause discussion with one of the guys out in Cloncurry actually working there. He was being terminated for sexual harassment, which in itself is probably not ideal, but what he'd been doing was sending text messages through Facebook to a lady that worked for him. These text messages were really quite explicit and we'd had the conversation and I said, "Look, probably this isn't going to work out but come tomorrow with your support person and we'll go through the process." He's turned up with his mum.

I sat there and made the comment, "What are you doing?" He said, "My mum is an HR professional, she's here to help me." I said, "Well, can we just stop. I know this is probably sort of not the way that things are meant to go, but can we stop this discussion now and I just want to have a word with you in private?" His mom got a bit upset and I said, "Now, look I'm pretty sure I need to talk to him in private without you there." Then I explained to him and showed him the copies of the messages that we had.

I said, "Look, I'm not going to be able to do this in front of your mum. I can't put this down on the table and show your mum what you had been saying." And he's completely freaked out. He's like, "Don't do that." I said, "Yes, look, I know, but how are we going to do this now? Because your mom's sitting out there wondering what the hell we're talking



about." Anyway, we resolved that situation but in terms of politically correct one, it was probably the most appropriate to tell now. That was one of the more entertaining discussions around termination. I said, "I can't believe you brought your mum mate. What are you doing". That was such a bad idea.

Brett: That was a-- he might've learned from that one.

Matt: I hope so. I still talk to him. He sent me a text message the other day looking for something else. Yes, I think he appreciated the fact that I didn't just throw them on the table and he would have had even more trouble with just losing his job.

Brett: Yes, his mom might not have been very happy. [laughs]

Matt: No, I suspect she would have been very upset.

Brett: Oh, dear. Yes, so Matt, you've been living in Mount Isa for over 15 years and I know Jenn reasonably well and there are decisions and compromises you all make as a family along the way. Is there anything you or Jenn would say to people who are thinking about going to work in an area like Mount Isa or- and it doesn't have to be Mount Isa. It could be over at Tom Price or somewhere and the decisions you have to make jointly and what's helped with that for both you and Jenn to continue making those decisions?

Matt: Yes, look that's a really important question I think in anyone's career because being able to do these sorts of roles in somewhat remote areas, it's important that your partner's happy and comfortable I suppose. Whether it's happy, it's more comfortable on occasions and around what's been going on. Jenn and I have had ongoing sort of discussion around that for the last 15 years. We certainly didn't come back to Mount Isa with a 15-year plan, we came with a couple of year plan and see where it goes from there.

I think probably the key thing there is she's found a real role in the community and she's done things that may not necessarily have been what were the plans originally. Also, you do things in a regional community that you've never done before. Getting out and getting involved has stood us in really good stead. I know she was pretty interested in potentially leaving Mount Isa earlier on. At one point, I mentioned that there was a job opportunity over in Canada and this was probably three to five years into our stay. It was at the transition point where after two years she actually started to enjoy what we were doing.

The decision there was why are we leaving now? I'm part of the community, I really enjoy what I'm doing, the kids are really happy. I know the kids really enjoy the safety and the friends and the community aspect of living in a regional town. They'll disappear after school, they'll walk themselves home from school, ride a bike, go and play. Often we're trying to find them at sort of six o'clock at night to come in and have dinner. I think that that aspect of living in a regional town has really been what's great for us. We were at a stage where we moved from Melbourne, had a couple of children and a young family. I just don't think it could have been better for us.



That's really helped us from that side of things and that's, I suppose the reason we've stayed there. We really enjoyed and to the point now where my role, a lot of discussions has been around well maybe you should be living in Brisbane. To me at the moment, that's actually a negative with where we sit as a family and where Jenn sits in her career and her enjoyment of what's happening out there, then I don't really want to leave. I know that means I've got to travel more but for the family side of things, we've chosen that the regional lifestyle actually suits us a lot better.

Brett: Yes. It's interesting. A lot of people do say when you tell them that you've worked in places like Mount Isa is, "Well, why would you go there?" But I think a lot of people underestimate the value of that community and the closeness with a lot of those communities for some time is quite valuable.

Matt: No, they really do and even the impact you can have. Now I'm also the chairman of the aged care home there and I mean, I've got no idea about that sort of stuff. I'm an engineer. You get involved in things that you never thought you would be involved in and to see the difference you can actually make. I don't think you get those opportunities in Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne.

Brett: That would certainly be the case. A question to you, Matt, in terms of your financial world, is there something you'd give as a guidance to your younger self around the things you've done over time and your family, you and Jenn have done over time maybe that you'd be willing to share with our listeners?

Matt: Yes, I mean the key thing that I wish I'd done differently was start earlier. I know that sounds pretty obvious and most people probably say the same thing. I really wish I'd started a lot earlier and then the other one was to spend the time. I've struggled now to spend the time to look after that side of things properly but focus on that a little bit earlier of having things set up properly. Probably the one I talked about of the partnership that had with the guys in Melbourne and how that would have all worked out.

Some advice on how to set that up and some advice on how to structure it at the time would have been much more beneficial financially to me than what it was so. They're probably the key things that I'd think of in that area.

Brett: Yes, and certainly I think it's a common story of finding the right advice is not always easy. Finding people you can trust to provide you who that might be is probably one of the key things that I see.

Matt: Yes. I think the trust comment's really important. I know I went through a few people over time and they are trusting I think is probably the key one for me. You need to actually believe that the person has got your interests at heart and is actually going to look after it because obviously, the biggest fear is that it all disappears after all the hard work. That's a pretty key aspect for me, that trust side.

Brett: Yes. Well, Matt, thanks for joining us today and for giving our listeners some insight into the world of a mining and resources industry executive. It's been great to have you here, so thanks very much.

Matt: No problems at all. Thanks for having me.

Brett: For those listening, if you'd like to speak to Matt, you're more than welcome to connect with him on LinkedIn and you'll see that information on our podcast series page. Thanks, Matt.

Matt: Thank you, Brett.

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