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# Supportive systems

**In his quest to shake up Xylem's Australian operations, Managing Director Jim Athanas started a cultural revolution.**

IMAGES SCOTT EHLER

**X**ylem is a global water technology business with operations in more than 150 countries. Jim Athanas came on board twelve months ago as Managing Director of its Australian operation. With his broad experience in water systems in the food and beverage, building services, mining, oil and gas, and steel industries, it was felt that Jim was the perfect choice for finding new, post-mining-boom opportunities for the company.

"The main purpose for me to come on board was to align the organisation to get after the growth opportunities in the market. We can't use mining as an excuse not to grow. And really, it's come down to having people that are united around a common purpose, working towards a common goal, and working with common values," Jim explains.

He spent his first days on the job doing a discovery tour and didn't make any decisions apart from things required in the usual business operations. Jim visited sixteen branches across Australia and New Zealand, as well as seven global manufacturing sites, all within a 120-day period. "During that time, I also spoke with a lot of our existing customers, who are predominately within the mining, metal, and municipality sectors. And from that, I understood that, while we have great products and services, we predominately just took them to >>

**xylem**  
Let's Solve Water

**Name** Jim Athanas  
**Company** Xylem  
**Position** Managing Director, Oceania  
**HQ** Sydney, Australia  
**Employees** 340

market in two particular sectors: mining and municipality.

“We really took advantage of the mining boom,” Jim says. “That said, mining still exists but they have moved from capex to opex. It will always be a very important part of the business, as we have a successful ongoing rental business, and we are investing in building a new branch in Karratha, Western Australia, to service the Pilbara region. If you look at food and beverage and agriculture combined, they contribute similar GDP to the Australian economy as the mining industry does. And what do they use a lot of? Water. So I realigned the organisation to take what has worked really well for us in the mining and municipal sectors, and broaden our portfolio to target other market sectors which are growing. Australia exports a lot of food, and agriculture is a big part of our industry.”

Noticing a lot of new buildings being built — residential and commercial — as well as a lot of tunnelling construction, Jim also saw an opportunity to take advantage of the current construction boom. All of these operations require water — transporting, dewatering, treating, monitoring, or measuring, in any form. “So again I realigned the organisation to really utilise that opportunity,” he says.

“That enabled me to promote people within the organisation, and to also recruit new people to target new market sectors, and as part of that I worked in collaboration with my senior leadership and HR teams to come up with our new cultural documents which outlined how we were going to work more closely. We called it ‘Working Together’. I wanted to provide people with a clear direction and show them how



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we should cooperate and collaborate to achieve great things in the new sectors we were targeting. And what that gave them was the ability to unite around a common purpose. For us, this is about creating innovative solutions to solve our customers’ water challenges in three key areas: water productivity, water quality, and water resilience.”

This renewed purpose led Jim to shake up the way Xylem approached its customers. “That’s been part of what I call the ‘cultural revolution’. Historically, we go to a customer and say ‘Look, we’ve got a great pump, it’s very efficient. Do you want to buy one?’ Now we’re moving to a different approach, which is ‘Hello customer, we’re here to help you solve your water needs; let me understand your process. And by the way, we make great products, which I will bring to you once I understand how and what you require.’

“So to really arm our people we’re actually working with a third-party training organisation called Wilson Learning that provides a consultative sales approach based around a four-step process. It’s intuitive and simple, which has made it easier to roll out. Basically, the process is about relating — really overcoming any lack of trust, understanding different needs, and advocating a solution. Once you’ve done that, it’s solely about supporting the customer. It’s as simple as that.

“We’ve seen the competition go the other way,” says Jim. “So what we’re really proud of is that we provide a full, end-to-end service — at all of our sixteen branches we have workshop facilities, and we have the capability to service our pumps and other equipment both on location and also in our own facilities, which makes us quite unique in the Australian market. We are one of the very few companies to provide that type of full service.” ■