



David Semple, P.Eng.

The road to satisfaction working abroad

David Semple, P. Eng., heads up engineering for Clyde Engineering in Sydney, a company that designs and builds railway locomotives and rail passenger vehicles, primarily for the Australian market. Engineering Dimensions talked with him over the 'Net about the challenges of his new life and work Down Under.

Q. What brought you to Australia?

A. I started my career with the Electro-Motive Division of General Motors Corporation at the Diesel Division in London, Ontario, which is the primary site for our North American locomotive manufacturing and where a significant amount of our locomotive design engineering is done. In 1992, I got the opportunity to move to our Electro-Motive Division in La Grange, Illinois, just outside of Chicago.

Clyde Engineering has been working with Electro-Motive for the past 50 years. While Electro-Motive provides diesel engines and other key components, Clyde designs and builds the locomotives to meet specific Australian requirements. I was appointed to my current position—executive manager of engineering—in late 1997 and initially commuted between the United States and Australia. I moved my family to Australia in August of 1998.

Q. What's it like collaborating with personnel in different continents and time zones?

A. There are actually some interesting advantages to the 16-to-18-hour time difference. We can often make an inquiry to an engineer in North America late in the day here in Sydney, and have a response when we arrive at work the next morning.

Q. How did you prepare for working in Australia? How have you made the transition to working and living there?

A. At the time I started the Australian



Canadian David Semple, P.Eng., is shown here with a full-scale mockup of his current project—a state-of-the-art AC traction diesel-electric locomotive for Queensland Rail.

assignment, I was completing a Master of Management degree at Northwestern University in Illinois. In one of my final courses, we studied a business case concerning an American manager who moved to Australia. Because his staff in Australia appeared to be very similar to their American counterparts, he overlooked subtle but important cultural differences. He did not attempt to build close personal relationships with his staff, and he made important decisions without consulting them. Key members of his staff resented this, and he failed badly. I certainly want to be more successful than the manager in this business case.

Q. Even though English is the main language in Australia, what cultural and linguistic differences did you have to adjust to?

A. There are subtle cultural differences between Canada, the U.S. and Australia. There are many linguistic differences, even within the railway industry. For instance, in North America, we use railway "cars" to haul freight. In Australia, we use railway "wagons."

Q. Many people accept positions abroad knowing the move will affect their families. How has it affected yours?

A. I am married and have two boys, aged

11 and 16. The family has certainly been affected by our move to Australia. The boys left a top-rated school system in Illinois, and my wife Susan left a good job. However, I believe the boys will benefit from their experiences here. They have quickly made new friends and settled in to their new schools. Susan has taken a little longer to become comfortable here. She picked up driving on the left side of the road very quickly, but may never get used to the reptiles and spiders.

Q. How does the work ethic or culture in Australia differ from that in North America?

A. I had heard many stories about Australians being "laid-back" and carefree compared to North Americans. However, we are working on two major contracts at Clyde right now, and my staff and I are putting in very long days, just as we would in North America under similar circumstances.

We do notice that banking and store hours are very limited compared to North America, making it less convenient to shop and conduct business transactions.

Q. Could you give an example of how Australian engineering standards differ from North American ones?

A. There is much greater emphasis in Australia on noise reduction. This applies to both noise levels in the driver's cab of the locomotive, and stationary and pass-by noise externally. Over the past few years, the standards for acceptable noise levels have been lowered. We have devoted significant resources toward meeting the new standards, and I believe that we have developed some innovative solutions.

Q. What's the best part of living in Australia?

A. There are certainly many positives about living in Australia. This is a beautiful country with friendly and helpful people, and you can play golf 12 months of the year! Life away from your home is only what you make it. If you put forth the effort, this is a wonderful place to work and raise a family.

Karen Hawthorne