

# HIGH FLIER

**The head of a large Australian superannuation fund once complained that a young employee at AAS didn't know anything about the super industry. Little did they know almost a decade later that same employee would be chief executive at AvSuper. Darren Snyder reports.**

AvSuper chief executive Michelle Wade fell into a superannuation career almost by accident. Searching for what she thought would be an appropriate nine-to-five day job with no Christmas roster in a shopping centre, Wade decided to join AAS as an administration manager in the mid-90s.

She was fortunate enough that her first superannuation employer wanted someone with team leadership and people management skills, not necessarily super experience.

"That was a terrific but the day I started they made me aware of a client complaint about somebody who didn't know anything about super looking after their business," Wade recounts.

"If I hadn't taken the role, and if the head of what is still a large superannuation fund in Australia hadn't made a serious complaint about recruiting somebody with no superannuation experience – it might not have led to this role so I have much to be grateful for."

Wade was soon encouraged into a Diploma of Superannuation Management and quickly discovered, much to her own surprise, that she had a real knack for super.

Before the super journey began Wade graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Applied Communications) from the University of Western Sydney in 1991. Although trained as a journalist and professional writer, she wasn't interested in that career and moved into fashion and music.

"It was terrific. It was great fun and very dynamic but it wasn't particularly intellectually stimulating," Wade says.

By 1998 Wade had moved to Melbourne with her AAS role where she was the administration manager for superannuation clients for another couple of years.

Between this and taking up the chief executive role at AvSuper in 2007, Wade says she moved on to a couple of other superannuation roles including a brief stint working with self-managed superannuation funds (SMSFs). She says there has always been an enthusiasm to try different roles and get more experience "to learn more about the broader aspects of the industry."

One of the greater experiences came immediately before taking on the AvSuper role. Wade spent 18 months to and froing between Australia and New Zealand setting up KiwiSaver schemes, which she says was "a terrific opportunity".

"It was an exciting time to get in on the ground level. Everyone was setting up new schemes and new arrangements were in place because of legislation," Wade says.

"An Australian organisation wanted to provide similar services in New Zealand as the ones provided to their clients here. It was a really exciting time to be part of an industry that had just started up."

Upon returning to Australia in 2007, Wade was looking for similar roles where she had the ability to "really make a difference across an organisation" as well as something where she "could work more closely with boards, with a team and with fund members."

She originally applied for the AvSuper chief executive position with little intention of taking it on – it was more about the interview experience and to get her name out there as someone who was interested in those sorts of roles.

"Once I actually met the board and was shortlisted, and went through a couple rounds of interviews, I was so impressed with the board and their approach to the fund," Wade says.

"Frankly I would have moved to Timbuktu if it required me to go. It has been the best move of my life. I met my husband here who's a Canberra boy so it must have been kismet."

Wade says running AvSuper is akin to overseeing a community. The mid-sized fund was originally set up for Airservices Australia and Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) employees. AvSuper now has more than \$2 billion in funds under management and about 6500 members.

"These are highly engaged members. A lot of funds talk about engagement but when you've got 6500 you learn a lot about what engagement really looks like," Wade says.

"It's difficult to see how we could deliver the service we do for members if we were 116,000 or so members."

In the last four to five years AvSuper has seen a significant increase in members from other aviation oriented employers and members, especially in regional areas. It's not necessarily passenger airlines but freight and aviation safety employers.

She adds there has to be a different approach to scale and complexity with a fund such as AvSuper. Some members have some of the highest account balances in Australia.

"The members are highly engaged and have mainly high account balances – and everything you do has the capacity to make a difference to every one of them. There's no place to hide," Wade says.

An interesting aspect of the fund includes members having concerns about securing their retirement plan with far less reliance on Centrelink.

Wade says there is a lot of interest in making sure members have tax effective arrangements in place and that they've got flexibility to adapt to circumstances, especially if they take different roles or take a break.

"Having fewer members certainly makes it easier to provide a high level of customer service, and in our case that mainly relates to financial advice services," Wade says.

"But you're able to work with them to look at their whole picture and understand all of their circumstances. For many of our members – particularly the older members with a public sector history – their savings aren't necessarily in super. They tend to be well remunerated and often have considerable savings or assets outside of

super that needs to be taken into account in an advice consultation.

"It makes for really detailed and quite interesting conversations."

It might be a slightly unusual arrangement but Wade says it has been tremendously rewarding.

"It's a really good way to re-think the traditional ways of doing things. You don't have the kind of budget you might have with hundreds of thousands of members delivering admin fees. So you have to be really clever how you go about introducing things and how to be able to introduce them in an efficient way because you don't have access to the kind of assets to invest in a big way," she says.

A career in superannuation spanning almost 20 years has also allowed Wade the opportunity to professionally affiliate with several representative groups. She is a fellow of the Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia (ASFA) and earlier this year Wade ceased her non-executive director role at Women in Super.

She said the Women in Super role was a terrific opportunity to work with local ladies in Canberra by building a network, providing education and personal growth opportunities.

Wade says prior aviation industry experience was not needed to take on the top job at AvSuper but learning about it has made life easier year in year out.

"It was something I was always very interested in, so it was a good fit. Many of our members are aviation enthusiasts as well as working in the industry," Wade says.

"So learning how their careers will progress, how their organisations work, the sorts of things they do in their day jobs has certainly allowed us to add more value than a non-generic arrangement would." **FS**



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Michelle Wade

