

Skills Highway Award: KiwiRail

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/album/4446506/video/229801769>

An increased focus on health and safety has created opportunities for KiwiRail to develop and use new technologies and identify more efficient ways of doing business. But this has also created a requirement for a new set of skills for its employees.

With this in mind, the organisation has created a learning programme for its frontline staff.

KiwiRail is a state-owned enterprise, transporting 18 million tonnes of freight, valued at up to \$20 billion, and more than a million passengers every year. With more than 3,500 staff in locations across the country, KiwiRail is one of New Zealand's largest transport industry employers.

In 2015 the organisation partnered with The Learning Wave to develop a learning programme for frontline staff. The Back to Basics training programme was designed to address literacy and numeracy needs of staff, and also contribute to KiwiRail's long-term business needs.

Delivered in five one-day blocks across two to three months, the workshops cover topics including effective communication strategies, empowering people by creating accountability and ownership and engaging with customers and stakeholders. It encourages frontline staff to use their workplace knowledge to take ownership of ideas that will improve the workplace for everyone, and participants work on a problem-solving initiative throughout the programme, exploring options to solve the issue they have identified and presenting their findings.

It's also a great opportunity to build connections across KiwiRail by sharing information about the work being done around the business, often resulting in solutions to mutual problems.

Since 2015, KiwiRail has committed more than 12,000 hours of literacy and numeracy for 405 eligible learners (345 funded learners and 60 other learners) across the business. Eligible learners are New Zealand citizens assessed as having a low level of literacy or numeracy or both.

Back to Basics has been strongly led and supported by KiwiRail's CEO Peter Reidy and has been backed by the executive team and senior leaders throughout the organisation. Even when faced with external challenges, such as the Kaikoura earthquake and the Midland Fire, the organisation has remained committed to the programme.

Managers are asked to ensure participants have the necessary time away from work to undertake the training and are well supported throughout the three-month period. On the last day of the programme, participants share with their manager a problem or challenge in their job that they have worked on during their learning journey, and are personally congratulated and presented with a graduation gift by a member of the Leadership Team.

Once the programme has finished, managers are supported to encourage their team member to continue the learning and development process.

KiwiRail recently appointed a Leadership Capability Manager, which it believes will add strength to the focus on creating a learning organisation and will support the Back to Basics initiative. KiwiRail has identified leadership development as a key strategic lever to assist the transformation of the business, and are investing significantly in this area.

Back to Basics is now up to its third intake and this year will see the first Back to Basics Alumni Roadshow, where previous participants from the programme will get together to further embed their learning and strengthen relationships within the network support groups.

Courses run so far have generated a number of problem-solving initiatives from participants including:

- The Great Melling Line Clean Up - a community and environmental project that received media coverage.
- A TranzAlpine/ Scenic Grab a Seat idea.
- An initiative to liaise with clients and charge for wagon dwell to generate income and drive productivity.
- A review of how written information is communicated to staff on a daily basis to improve understanding and productivity.
- Scrap recycling - an idea which had environmental and sustainability impacts as well as financial savings to the business.

Group General Manager Human Resources Andrew Norton said after participant presentations last November, "The ideas we heard were thoughtful, proactive and well developed. It was particularly pleasing to see that one of our core values - care and protect - was at the forefront of the graduates minds."

Post-programme assessments have shown positive shifts across all of the literacy progressions, with increases in the median scores for reading, writing and numeracy.

Feedback from staff undertaking the training shows increases in the ability to problem-solve, read bar charts and line graphs and communicate in the workplace. Other reported gains were in having the tools needed to work more effectively in a team and knowledge of health and safety legislation.

But the real benefit of the programme, says Learning Operations Manager Amy Baars, is when the learning is applied back into the workplace to increase individual performance and team results.