

Skills Highway Award: Waste Management NZ Ltd



Video link: <https://vimeo.com/album/4446506/video/229801564>

A new stationery procurement system, better designed workshop equipment and a more dynamic health and safety induction programme are just some of the benefits of Waste Management NZ Ltd's workplace literacy and numeracy programme.

Waste Management NZ holds local government contracts for kerbside collection and commercial and general public refuse collection, and works on joint venture projects with local government and other partners. It has more than 1200 staff at various sized sites throughout New Zealand, from Kaikohe to Dunedin.

"Waste Management's sites offer a variety of skilled and non-skilled job roles, and we have a high number of Pasifika and migrant employees who have English as a second language and may not have completed high school or higher level qualifications," says National Corporate Services and HR Manager Sharon Scott.

The business wanted to build the communication skills and confidence of this level of its workforce and provide a career pathway, so developed a workplace literacy and numeracy project called 'Skills First', partnering with training provider Upskills.

"Health and safety is a huge part of what we do and part of the drive to roll out Skills First was related to this. We're an organisation working in a high-risk industry - our drivers and labourers need to understand and act on information we give them to get home safely," says Sharon.

Skills First also opens doors, she says. "If I've not had such a good experience at school, then jumping into a first line management course is not really an option but something like this is

a lovely segue into a learning pathway. We want our employees to know we will invest in their present and their future, and for that message to spread out into the community.”

After anecdotal feedback that some of the sites and supervisors were experiencing difficulties related to literacy and numeracy, Waste Management opted to work with Upskills to develop a solution that could be rolled out across the country. Tutors visited depots to understand the workplace literacy and numeracy demands of each role and site.

“The site supervisors and managers understand where gaps in literacy and numeracy are impacting on customer communication, quality of service and, importantly, health and safety. It gave us the chance to tailor the goals of the programme to suit the needs of each site within the framework of Skills First.”

To get buy-in for the programme across the entire company, Skills First was presented to the executive team, at monthly regional managers’ meetings and to all employees through the internal staff portal.

The programme, which began in 2016, provides 40 hours of training for each participant. In the first year 100 staff took part and Waste Management plans to have another 75 employees complete the Skills First initiative this year.

A key component is the chance to explore solutions to a work-related issue, allowing participants to apply newly developed skills and learning to a real work context, with real impacts in terms of either safety, quality or cost-savings.

Participants’ direct managers are involved in helping set the direction for these projects, which are launched in the second half of the programme.

Throughout the programme, managers get regular updates and evaluations of participants’ progress. Successful projects are celebrated at monthly management meetings and via the online staff portal, and when formal training sessions came to an end, participants, managers, tutors and senior managers came together for project presentations and graduation celebrations

Supervisor feedback demonstrates the benefits to the business – when surveyed, almost all managers agreed they had seen an increase in verbal feedback from programme participants, and improvements in meeting participation, digital literacy and ability to read and understand health and safety documentation, complete written documents and understand instructions.

A range of projects have been completed at different sites as part of the Skills First programme, including creating new report templates that save time for a manager and give staff more responsibility, new standard of practice training documents, making stationery ordering easier for staff and building a new metal caddy toolbox that can fit between truck bays at one of Waste Management’s workshops. The Napier Skills First group won the Safety Award at the company’s 2017 staff awards for its project tackling site safety induction.

For staff, the programme has opened up new learning and career opportunities – 22 per cent of participants are completing a further training course and 15 per cent of the 2016 course have gone on to a next step qualification.

But there are more personal benefits too.

"I'm proud I'm finally doing something for myself because I always encourage my son to do his best and I've got no qualifications to back it up, so now I'm finally getting something so I can show him.... sometimes we sit together at the table and do our work together." Cliff, Lunn Ave Workshop

"I opened up since the course. In a group, I can talk. In the community I'm more able to help my friends as well as the way they talk to their kids. I tell them to encourage them, instead of telling them off. I got this from the course." Otila, Seaview Recycling

"The thing I have actually learned is how to communicate to the staff in a way that works for everyone. It's about staying calm and in control. I feel really good." Uta, Seaview Recycling