



## HEB Construction

### SKILLS HIGHWAY AWARD FINALIST



#### THE STORY

Addressing literacy issues among its 1000-strong workforce has brought unexpected spin-off benefits for HEB Construction.

The company believed that literacy problems could be a barrier to both productivity and workplace health and safety. Signs of a potential problem included a lack of questioning by employees at pre-start and toolbox meetings, a lack of understanding on how to complete paperwork, important questions not being asked at safety meetings and safety processes not being followed.

Innovation or creativity processes were being hampered, as was the development of team-building and problem-solving skills.

“Health and safety can be negatively impacted by workers struggling to read and understand safety rules and not participating in opportunities provided,” says HEB National Learning and Development Manager Lesley Southwick.

The company also identified that a perceived lack of literacy and numeracy skills often deterred staff from taking on apprenticeships or seeking other qualifications.

“There was a fairly low level of interest in trade qualifications from our current employees and we wanted to find a way to change this.”

As part of a Safer People initiative, HEB now provides a Safer People communication course, delivered by the Upskills training consultancy, that can help staff to improve numeracy and literacy skills, giving them an entry into a pathway to achieving a trade qualification or similar.

Of 25 people who have completed the course, 60 per cent have taken the opportunity to begin a qualification or apprenticeship. Apprentices are also provided with literacy and numeracy training at the beginning of their programme.

The courses start with a focus on safety and qualifications, but have also demonstrated a strong connection between literacy skills and mental wellbeing – and led to the development of a mental-health initiative now being rolled out across the company.

As part of a course, one HEB team proposed a Wellbeing for Work (W4W) project focused on mental health in the civil construction sector. Team members went on to present their ideas to management, who decided to embrace the concept company-wide.

“We ended up at active engagement and empowerment of people to follow through with confidence on their ability to be a part of the change they would like to see in their industry around mental wellbeing,” says Lesley.

W4W was created by a team of men who had limited literacy skills at the start of their communication course, she says. “This is a team who openly admit that for years they hid their own literacy shortcomings, effectively undermining their potential for leadership. The team now know that through the creation of W4W they have proven that they are true leaders, and that they should be immensely proud of what they have achieved.”

Other groups on the programme also delivered projects with confidence and found their voices to speak up about not only health and safety but business innovation as well. Survey results show that staff doing the courses feel more confident about reading and writing forms and reading hazard boards. Seventy-eight per cent feel more confident about speaking up at work.

Benefits have also been felt outside work. One worker who completed the course has told of now being able to read a story to his mokopuna. Another is now able to communicate with his bank in regard to documents he never could decipher previously.

Managers tell of seeing greater engagement in health and safety but also operational discussions and decision-making.

General Manager of Operations Support John Turnbull says that as a long-serving manager at HEB, he personally found the W4W project very humbling. “The team pushed through their fears to participate in our first-ever literacy programme and in the process, developed a wellness initiative that we can apply nationally.”

The support for the Safer People Communications Course is evident across HEB, says Southwick, with the latest round of courses over-booked. “Managers who were skeptical are now saying ‘I might have to eat my words. I’ve seen the difference this course has made in other teams and I want this for my team now.’”

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## THE CHALLENGE

HEB was concerned literacy issues were negatively affecting health and safety and productivity, and also hindering the uptake of apprenticeships and other opportunities to gain qualifications.

## STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- The Safer People Communications Course was introduced, delivered by a specialist provider
- As part of the course, each team was asked to propose an innovative project, promoting greater engagement and empowerment
- When this generated a valuable wellbeing initiative, HEB embraced it
- Apprentices are also provided with literacy and numeracy training at the beginning of their Apprenticeship Programme



## RESULTS AND BENEFITS

- The courses have lifted both literacy and numeracy
- Course participants have a better understanding of HEB terms and terminology, are more confident speaking up at work, and more confident with the forms they read and write at work
- Some have also noticed benefits outside work.
- Managers report greater engagement and self-confidence.
- The W4W spin-off is set to underpin the HEB approach to mental health and wellbeing company-wide.

## KEY LEARNING

Unlocking communication skills through literacy training can lead to wider gains.

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