



Hutt Gas and Plumbing

DIVERSE TALENT

SMALL-MEDIUM ORGANISATION WINNER



When Hutt Gas and Plumbing Director Colleen Upton was approached by a future female plumber and gasfitter whose request for an apprenticeship had been turned down by 25 businesses, she knew she needed to drive industry change, starting in her own workplace.

Hutt Gas and Plumbing was founded in 1992 and its team of three directors and 24 staff provides plumbing, gasfitting and drainlaying services to residential and commercial customers in the Wellington region. It operates within a male-dominated construction industry currently experiencing an acute skilled labour shortage.

As well as employing Shelley Sydow, who became the company's first female plumber and gasfitter, Colleen and her fellow directors Darren Smith and Grant Jefferson became outspoken champions for employing more women in their trade.

Most plumbing businesses are small male owner-operated businesses and many do not train apprentices, leaving little opportunity for women to secure roles. In the early days of trying to increase female participation, Colleen was met with flat out refusals.

So she focused on making changes within the Hutt Gas and Plumbing business, getting the team onboard and overcoming obstacles such as sourcing trade clothing that

fitted women's body shapes and ensuring access to suitable toilet facilities on commercial sites.

By employing more female apprentices, then nominating them for awards and increasing their profile at industry events, Hutt Gas and Plumbing has established a reputation within the industry of providing a safe, inclusive and diverse environment. This has created a demand for apprenticeship placements and attracted female staff from other businesses.

It's put the company in a strong position to lead by example. Hutt Gas and Plumbing's workforce is 21 per cent female (37.5 per cent if admin staff are included) compared with an industry average of just 2.6 per cent. It employs the highest number of female plumbers of any plumbing company in New Zealand, with five women in that role.

"By training more female apprentices we hope to see more female-owned plumbing companies in the future, thereby increasing opportunities for future female apprentices," Colleen says. "Our male apprentices also benefit from being exposed to a diverse work environment where working with a woman is not an issue."

Apprenticeship training has always played a vital role at Hutt Gas and Plumbing. It provides an opportunity to embed the company's culture and values into its future workforce, as well as leadership opportunities for senior staff.

"When setting up work teams, we ensure all staff get the opportunity to learn from male and female staff. These teams are continually rotated to provide apprentices with a well-rounded experience of different personalities, leadership styles and guidance."

The business has trained more than 50 apprentices and there are more than 14 plumbing businesses in Wellington that are now owned by or employ former Hutt Gas and Plumbing graduates.

The apprenticeship training includes one-on-one pastoral care and mentorship, career advice, budgeting advice and assistance with preparing book work prior to entering tertiary training. The team organises staff study groups for support and encourages staff to join relevant industry organisations such as the National Association of Women in Construction, paying the membership fees.

There is also an expectation that staff will work towards higher qualifications.

"We have the highest number of certifying plumbers and gasfitters of any other plumbing firm in Wellington. A certifying qualification is the highest qualification attained in the industry," Colleen says.

Remuneration is based on qualifications and experience, reducing gender-based pay differences.

Colleen continues to advocate for more women in the industry through her influential national governance roles and industry positions.

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THE AIM

Hutt Gas and Plumbing wanted to create a safe, inclusive gender-diverse environment to lead the way for other companies to employ more women as a solution to the industry's skilled labour shortage.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- The benefits of employing female plumbers were shared with the entire business.
- Female apprentices and qualified plumbers were employed and their success was showcased publicly to challenge outdated beliefs around women lacking the strength and resilience needed to work in the industry.
- Practical issues such as sourcing trade clothing suitable for women's body shapes and ensuring access to toilet facilities for women working on commercial sites were dealt with.
- Work teams were set up so that all staff had the opportunity to learn from both males and females in senior roles.



- Female apprentices were nominated for competitions and awards to increase their profile at industry events.
- Staff, including female plumbers, were encouraged to achieve higher qualifications and career progression so that there will be more women owning plumbing companies in the future, creating even more opportunities for female apprentices to enter the industry.
- A female company director took on national governance roles and industry positions to try to influence other plumbing businesses to increase female representation.

KEY LEARNING

By demonstrating to the wider industry that a gender-diverse workforce is not only achievable, it's also beneficial and a solution to a labour shortage, Hutt Gas and Plumbing has established itself as an employer of choice and a leader in the sector.

**DO WORKPLACE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION WELL
AND DO WELL BECAUSE OF IT.**

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