

## Skills Highway Award Entrant: The Selwyn Foundation

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/141146181>

**The shared language of employee wellbeing.** The Selwyn Foundation (Selwyn) is a Charitable Trust providing aged care services to older adults in the upper North Island. Selwyn has around 630 employees; 75% of whom are female and the average age is 49. Between 70% and 80% have English as a second language and a large proportion of caregivers are from Pacific Islands with limited educational experience.

It became apparent that low levels of literacy and numeracy amongst the diverse workforce were affecting how well staff could perform their roles. Issues were identified through poor quality progress notes and sensitive incident reports, as well as feedback from clients on the communication skills of caregivers and medication errors which were linked to poor numeracy skills.

In May 2014 a pilot learning programme was approved, allowing participants to commit to a two hour class once a week for 20 weeks to improve their spoken interactions with colleagues and clients, as well as improve writing skills.

The course focused on developing literacy and numeracy skills through the context of different aspects of work at The Selwyn Foundation. A key feature of the course was to transfer tasks so that learners could put into practice what they were learning at work and then report what happened when they came back to class. For example, one of these tasks was to ask a resident about their life before they entered residential care and find out more about them.

The programme was called the "Business Communications Course" so that participants would be proud to attend, rather than be ashamed or embarrassed. For many, this programme is the first step they have taken to address skill levels that they may have been concealing for years.

"I want to do my ACE training (to achieve the National Certificate) but I don't have the confidence," said a pilot participant from South Auckland at the beginning of the course. "I only went to school to eat lunch."

This same employee has now started her National Certificate, along with a colleague who has worked for Selwyn for 26 years but had never completed any formal study. Within Selwyn these qualifications are linked to pay scale and will therefore enable these women to increase their salary rates.

The issue of low literacy and numeracy was initially identified as a result of operational difficulties, but Selwyn quickly realised that it must also have a significant effect on the personal lives of employees and their families.

“The impact of the course on families has been hard to quantify – we are sure that materials are passed on and lots of discussions happen at home,” says Derene Els, one of the Business Communications Course tutors.

“One of the ladies I was teaching last year used to get a lift from her adult son who was unemployed. I discovered that he used to sit in the car park for the whole class waiting for her and so we invited him in. At first he used to just sit at the back, but as he gained confidence, he started to get involved in the tasks. In the end he even did the final assessment with the ladies! He wants to join the Police and he knows his reading and writing need to get better so I like to think that this was a spur for him to start working on his skills.”

While participants have learnt literacy and numeracy skills, it is evident that the opportunity is having a much wider impact on the trainees’ grandchildren, their relationships with other staff and the residents they care for. This wider impact prompted a key component of Selwyn’s learning strategy to be “participants build skills for life as well as skills for the job”.

The pilot course also demonstrated further benefits in terms of employee wellbeing. Some participants were identified as having difficulties due to eyesight or hearing. This has prompted Selwyn to put aside money to assist those in similar situations attending the 2015 course. The organisation has also signed up for the Specsavers Premium Club which offers half price eye tests and other savings to employees and their families.

The introduction of the Business Communications course in 2014 has resulted in positive outcomes for Selwyn and individual employees, and work is underway to ensure this can be sustained in the long term. In 2014, 31 participants took part in the pilot course at three Auckland sites. In 2015, the course is being extended and a further 49 employees have already participated, covering other Auckland sites and the sites in the Waikato and an additional 14 will complete the course at the Whangarei site bringing the total staff taking part in 2015 to 63 or around 10% of all Selwyn’s employees.

“I think this course is a fantastic initiative and hugely beneficial for our ever increasing multicultural workforce,” stated Lorraine Sobotka, Selwyn’s HR Manager whose assistant was a participant in the pilot programme.

“Its continuance into the future can only benefit the residents, the staff and the reputation of Selwyn.”