

Skills Highway Award Winner: Russell Group

VIDEO LINK: <https://vimeo.com/104979440>

Core Strength literacy programme gives strong foundations for company's future growth.

The building industry has been challenged by the economic climate in recent years and the road ahead is not yet a smooth one. With experienced, loyal staff, solid client relationships and a diverse business, the leaders of the Russell Group are confident they have the skills and attributes required to ensure sustainable growth even in periods of economic downturn.

The Russell Group comprises four major companies, Dominion Constructors Ltd (DCL), Russell Gordon Contracting (RGC), Acrow Ltd and Stresscrete. They have been trading for over 30 years and cover most elements of the construction industry and sectors of the market.

The Russell Group Core Strength programme incorporates employees from Dominion Constructors Ltd and Russell Gordon Contracting, collectively employing close to 280 staff, many providing long term service and invaluable experience.

The construction and allied sectors are traditionally male dominated with high numbers of Maori and Pasifika working in them. Many who have not completed a formal education and for whom English is not their first language.

This in itself presents numerous business challenges, with rigorous health and safety compliancy and work in dangerous situations, it is important that employees have well developed literacy, language, numeracy and over-arching critical thinking skills. In order for all employees to genuinely engage in company growth and to fully understand future initiatives, the underlying literacy, language and numeracy skill gaps needed to be addressed.

It was also recognised that there was a lack of core financial literacy skills across a large proportion of the employees and that this could be addressed effectively through an in-house core skills programme. Increased financial literacy skills enables people to understand workplace financial information including graphs, quantity of materials and ways for everyone to help save money. At a wider level it also helps staff to better manage their personal finances and budgets and possibly uncover ways for the business to increase profit.

The organisations have benefitted directly from the initiatives of Core Strength and the more recent literacy and numeracy embedded 'Skills for Industry' training in numerous ways. On-going capability training has become business as usual instead of the companies focussing solely on compliancy training. Participants' increased confidence in meetings on-site is noticed by people working directly with the participants.

One such employee, is Taka Ve'a, who spoke for the first time publicly at the Core Strength Graduation in 2013 in front of over 80 people including senior management and his three

daughters, who also performed two traditional Tongan dances. His eldest daughter shared with the audience the change in their father through the programme.

“Taka spoke of his fear of speaking English and how this had stopped him speaking at his daughter's wedding, upsetting his wife and family. Because of the opportunity to be part of Core Strength, he now has the confidence and skills to be able to speak and that his life (and his family's life) is happier. In other words, he is no longer sad and shamed”.

One of the key developments for 2014 is that through a greater understanding of the importance of capability training, the companies have looked outside the standard mechanism for recruiting new staff and partnered with Work and Income NZ (WINZ) using the Skills for Industry training initiative. 26 WINZ trainees undertook one day “off job” and four days “on the job” training, between 2-4 weeks in length. The “off job” training is an extended induction with embedded literacy, numeracy and money management training. This has been highly successful for both companies with 21 participants offered permanent employment and 13 of those progressing into Core Strength to continue their educational development.

The employment of younger staff from WINZ Skills for Industry is directly supporting the company's future growth. It addresses succession planning through a buddy system where experienced older staff in similar roles work alongside the younger staff. This ‘TuakanaTeina’ model or buddy system works particularly well in a sector where the majority of learning takes place ‘on the job’.

The ever changing and highly demanding nature of the New Zealand construction and related industries requires all people working in it to work to their full potential. Delivering an in-house quality programme utilising a highly experienced team is helping enable The Russell Group to meet their goals of promoting from within, increasing the core skills of its workforce across all job roles and developing the evolving needs of its current and future workforce.