

Countdown *Skills Highway*

Ensuring that workers have high levels of literacy and English competence helps improve workplace productivity and the lives of employees, and one of New Zealand's biggest supermarkets is proving it.

Countdown's Meat and Seafood Manufacturing Plant in South Auckland employs more than 400 team members. Research suggests that up to 40 per cent of the team, made up of people from 36 nationalities who live in the surrounding suburbs, could have low literacy skills.

Workers having difficulties with English creates a number of issues in the day-to-day operation of the plant, most noticeably that employees struggle to understand instructions or requests from their team leaders the first time. It also leads to difficulties in other areas of the employees' lives, and their ability to act independently in the wider world.



To help improve this, managers at the plant were asked to identify members of their teams who had difficulties completing and understanding documentation such as payslips and leave applications or who could not understand instructions from their team leaders due to language barriers. Ten of these workers were registered to attend a Literacy Project training programme, run in partnership with Aspire2 Business, which offered 16 2.5-hour weekly sessions, delivering 40 hours of learning.

Because of the variable needs of the plant, Countdown is only able to offer one of these courses a year, so leadership has gotten behind its one opportunity to get it right. Members of Countdown's leadership team attend learning sessions and assist the tutor in a number of ways, such as providing real world practical examples. Managers also have leeway to realign labour to cover the duties of those attending training to ensure that the learners have as much support as possible.

That first group of learners graduated from the programme in April 2018, and the leadership at Countdown has given Aspire2 Business approval for 15 extra hours of training for each participant in the next course.

Evidence of improvement for the learners has been clear in the workplace. Supervisors say that the need to repeat instructions to the employees is largely reduced, and this helps staff have more confidence in their work. The learners can now better identify and understand their responsibilities around safety and understand signs in the workplace that they perhaps did not know the meaning of prior to the course.

They can now also be more independent with their understanding of documentation, and supervisors have noticed that some communicate among each other in English, which hadn't been noticed before. Overall, the learners are communicating with more confidence on the job

These benefits to the learners have helped the operation of the plant, too. Some are asking if they can do more once they have completed their work and increased literacy means that there are fewer production errors at the plant.

When an incorrect marinade is selected because a staff member can't read the labels, the batch has to be thrown away. One participant stated in their midpoint feedback: "When my supervisor asks me to get the marinade for the meat I know the flavour because I can read the word."

Not only are the employees empowered in their interactions, but their confidence on the job has improved as well, which helps all concerned.



Leadership Development Specialist Jenny Gunn says the plant has a "real family feel" to it, and the learning project has helped the learners not just in their work, but in their personal life, too. Learners have reported being able to help their kids with their homework and helping spouses and other household members improve their own English. One learner said that where they used to ask their daughter to speak for them, "now I take my daughter out and I speak for myself".

The first run of this learning course has empowered learners and helped the business as a whole, and the learners will now be able to become programme 'buddies' and help their colleagues further their own learning of English in many more of these courses to come.

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