

Danone *Skills Highway*

An Auckland food manufacturer is using a workplace literacy programme to increase the productivity, engagement and skills of employees and protect its vulnerable consumers.

Danone is a global producer of infant formula and toddlers' nutritional supplements and has 430 staff in New Zealand. At its flagship Early Life Nutrition site in Auckland, only 14.5 per cent of the production team identify as New Zealand European/Pakeha. Most of the staff are non-native English speakers.



Managers discovered that although the team knew the manufacturing process from learning on the job, they had issues articulating their knowledge in production training assessments or training with new information. This prompted an assessment of the 45-strong production team at the Mt Wellington plant in 2016.

Danone's Production Manager Daniel Hynes described the results as "surprising and concerning". The assessment highlighted a huge gap in comprehension, reading and writing. Communication was another challenge. "We need employees to put their hands up and let us know if there's a problem."

Danone HR Manager Madeline Bower says: "In our industry, due to the vulnerability of our consumer, where formula is often the sole source of nutrition, our quality and food safety standards are exceptionally high. Numeracy and literacy is crucial for our production team as they're measuring ingredients, checking data, reading labels, and carrying out technical processes that are recorded."

Danone partnered with workplace literacy provider Aspire2 Business to create its Learning for Life initiative, a targeted training programme to boost literacy and numeracy levels and build communication and confidence within the team.

Participation was voluntary but more than 90 per cent of the plant's permanent production team enrolled in the course, which took place in work time for two hours each week. To graduate, participants had to complete 40 hours of education.

Classes were scheduled at the start of the shift to improve alertness and attendance and minimise impact on the plant.

Danone Training Manager Paul van der Meer says there was push back from some employees in the first month. "For some, it was their first time in formal education for decades. That can be daunting. However, after building confidence and tutor rapport, they committed and helped each other through - that group support was an unexpected, positive by-product."

A small group of employees completed mentor training to provide ongoing assistance to participants in the pilot programme. Now enthusiastic graduates support those doing the training. The programme's success is part of managers' KPIs and managers attend graduation ceremonies to demonstrate support and witness the remarkable impact the training is having.

"Graduations really bring home the value of the course. The first time I heard one of my night shift operators say more than 'hello' was at his graduation. It's powerful," says Daniel.

Learning for Life has benefited plant output and culture. Since its launch, Danone has opened a new plant. Employees have adapted easily to the increased automation and have provided input into updating standard operating procedures.



"At graduation, participants present feedback to the leadership team on topics they're passionate about. The confidence gained is clear; we love employees feeling they have the verbal skills and confidence to contribute," says Madeline.

The training initiative also boosted the recent launch of a productivity improvement app at the plant. Learning for Life graduates make up 47 per cent of the workforce but posted 68 per cent of the posts. Danone's People Survey shows workplace satisfaction scores for the Auckland production team have increased since the initiative was introduced.

The number of workers who agreed they had sufficient learning opportunities to develop their skills increased from 43 per cent in 2015 to 79 per cent in 2017. Those who supported the statement that morale is high in their team or department increased from 35 per cent to 70 per cent.

Complaints about Danone's products have decreased in the same period: in 2015, the company recorded 12 complaints per million units sold. This dropped to five in 2016 and sits at 0.8 year to date. Management believes the team's improved competency and engagement have contributed to this metric.

"It's really noticeable which employees have done the training. People share their experiences and then everybody wants to get on board," says Daniel. By the end of 2018, 90 per cent of all Auckland operators will have completed the course.

The learners are all assessed using the TEC Adult Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Tool at the start and end of the course, and results from the 2016 courses show gains in oral, reading, writing and numeracy skills.

But the impact of the programme goes beyond the worksite, Madeline says.

"Learning for Life has had a big impact on families and communities as well as the workplace. Improvements graduates reported included everything that a boost in confidence brings; better communications at home, problem solving with less aggression and overall the ability to engage in a positive way with their loved ones."

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