

Silver Fern Farms

Skills Highway

A previous winner of the Skills Highway award has continued its efforts to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of all of its employees and has seen numerous workplace benefits from this ongoing training programme.

Silver Fern Farms is New Zealand's leading marketer, processor and exporter of premium quality lamb, beef, venison and other meat products and employs 7000 people nationwide across a number of operations.

In 2016, management at Silver Fern Farms' Dargaville processing plant identified it had a number of staff with a large deficit in literacy and numeracy skills which was causing issues with staff retention, health and safety and compliance

It put together an innovative mentoring programme, in partnership with external training providers and the company's internal training team.

The programme was structured so that:

- It was open to all, no matter what level their literacy and numeracy was at
- It would be learner focused, and delivered by mentors during the day-to-day running of the plant
- A tutor trained as an Adult Literacy and Numeracy Educator, with a Level 5 Certificate, would support the mentors
- The mentors would also be encouraged to enrol by correspondence in that same qualification
- Mentors would record every interaction with staff that was support focused during their work day and relay that back to the tutor, then get feedback on their interactions to get the most out of their time spent with the learner
- Mentors would meet regularly with one another to compare notes and discuss successes, failures and issues

While the original funding applied for covered only 60 staff, more than 200 staff have now received training in some form or another, each receiving between 15 and 60 hours direct tuition.

The benefits of the training surpassed expectations, with improvements in staff retention among those who were trained; only six per cent of people who received more than 10 hours of mentoring left the plant, compared with 32 per cent across the entire workforce. Health and safety outcomes have drastically improved, with an increase in reporting of incidents, but a reduction of injuries causing lost time, and a reduction in the Total Incident Rate. Plant managers are also reporting an improved understanding of techniques, leading to higher quality as well as improved productivity levels and yields.

Individual staff members have also seen improvements, and 51 per cent of those tested in literacy and numeracy skills have gained a full step in either or both of those areas.



Staff have also reported increased financial independence, and some have been able to get financial advice to purchase homes and refinance their debt.

The programme is now being expanded, with mentors being trained to assist employees with medical and health care, financial literacy, among other new skills, and a new plant gym and vegetable garden have been established to improve employee wellbeing more generally.

Employees say that they “were able to bond together as a team and open up to each other” throughout the course, and that it was helpful because “it was about more than just bullet points”.

Other feedback said the programme created “a positive and helpful environment that gave me some learning techniques to apply in my job which makes my job easier and I can use those tools at home as well.”

“It’s a win-win for me.”

Silver Fern Farms is now looking to expand the programme to the rest of its operations.

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