

# Countdown

## Tomorrow's Workforce

Countdown is showing young New Zealanders that supermarkets are a valid career choice with innovative programmes aimed at university graduates and school leavers. One of the paybacks to the business is staff that offer fresh thinking and new ways of doing things.

Countdown operates more than 180 stores, four distribution centres, a meat and seafood manufacturing plant and a support office, employing more than 18,500 people throughout New Zealand.

Traditionally, says Culture and People Advisor Samantha Gray, supermarkets are viewed as a popular choice for part-time jobs, but not a place to build a career. This perception was backed up by high youth turnover rate in stores (a little higher than 30 per cent) and conversations with younger team members.



Setting out to change that view, the company launched the Countdown Graduate programme in 2015, initially employing eight candidates. Run across a 12-month period, it enables graduates to build capabilities in a chosen business stream by giving them access to real projects and responsibilities.

Countdown attends career expos and employer presentations at universities to attract applicants for its graduate programme. Following the initial application, graduates go through a rigorous recruitment process. If selected, their careers at Countdown start with a one-week orientation, launched by the Managing Director, which includes introductions to senior staff and an overview of the business.

Graduates are then rotated around the business to gain meaningful learning experiences. This was initially a challenge as graduate rotations were new to Countdown.

The graduate programme only helped create roles for youth who had attended university. So, Countdown launched its SEEDS (Students Entering Employment and Developing Skills) programme to cater for young people who were unsure about a career choice and looking for an alternative pathway to tertiary education.

SEEDS offers high school students the opportunity to work in a store for 10 days across a 10-week period, getting experience in all the supermarket departments and earning NCEA credits to support their education. As well as learning important retail skills, the students can build their confidence and are introduced to several career possibilities.

Countdown partnered with Service IQ, the industry training organisation for retail to launch SEEDS. Store team leaders had input into the programme to ensure it would not negatively impact day-to-day operations. A pilot scheme with two students ran at Countdown's Lincoln Road and Lynnmall stores. Both programmes are supported at senior levels in the company. Graduates each have a mentor from the Executive team and support from the Culture and People teams, previous graduates and the business units they work in.

SEEDS students each have an in-store buddy to support their training. The costs for this are absorbed by the store. Senior staff attend certificate presentations for students and store managers continue to

build relationships with local schools so young people can experience the variety of roles available at Countdown.

One tangible benefit of the graduate programme is that, to date, all the participants still work at Countdown, and several of the graduates have gone into leadership roles or specialist areas.

One graduate placed in the meat buying team was given responsibility for ranging, pricing and distribution of Christmas hams, which is an important seasonal category for Countdown. Her efforts resulted in a 13 per cent increase in sales year-on-year and a 28 per cent increase in profit.



Primary Freight Business Manager Christoph Muller says the graduates' fresh approach has challenged the business to review some of its processes. "They are making the leadership team think about better ways of doing business."

This year 1006 graduates applied to take part in the programme, compared with 284 in 2017. Following the initial SEEDS pilot, both students were offered part-time roles in stores. Countdown now has 68 SEED students in stores around the country and aims to increase this to 100 in the June 2018 intake.

Nina Massone was in the 2016 graduate programme and is now training to be a Store Manager. "Throughout the programme I was supported by many inspiring leaders from different levels and sectors within the business. I had coaches and mentors that were invested in my development."

Callum Oliver, from the same programme, is now an Indent Supply Planner. "I've learned more about my strengths and my weaknesses by being given real responsibilities and by learning through doing."

Countdown's General Manager of Culture and People Lauren Voyce says, "At a time when 90,000 young people aged 18-24 are NEETs (not in education, employment or training) and one in three New Zealand graduates have experienced unemployment since graduating, our early careers programmes couldn't be more critical. I hope that programmes like ours inspire other organisations to reach out to young people and inspire them about what they might achieve in the future."

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