



Big business gains at Spotless

Spotless employee, Falesoa Alaifaivia, at Wellington Hospital

A lift in workplace literacy levels has created a safer, more productive and empowered workforce at Spotless.

The Australasian service provider has four major New Zealand divisions providing food, cleaning, laundry and facility management. With over 10,000 employees in New Zealand, it is one of the country's largest private employers.

General Manager HR, Vaughan Biggs, says the business has a diverse workforce. Employees work at client sites in virtually every city and town in New Zealand.

Biggs says the company introduced workplace literacy training to create a safer and more productive workplace. It also wanted to grow strong relationships with clients, employees and unions.

"We realised that low literacy and numeracy levels weren't social issues to be worked around but commercial opportunities to increase productivity within our business."

He says raising foundation skills is essential for a business that depends on its people.

"The satisfaction of our clients, delivery of our services and our reputation rely totally on our people. Without them, we don't have a business."

Spotless now has a workplace literacy strategy in place. It sees upskilling as "part of the fabric" of the company.

"We are committed to literacy and numeracy upskilling. We know that if we can continue to help our 10,000 employees grow, we can grow New Zealand too."

A basic literacy and numeracy course was offered to 71 supervisors in laundry services in 2008.

Since 2010, a literacy and numeracy programme has been rolled out to 127 front-line employees in cleaning, food service and orderly roles.

Training was subsidised by the Tertiary Education Commission.

IMPACT

\$50,000 a year drop in food waste



Safer workplaces

Biggs says improved reading and writing has led to improved health and safety compliance.

“With an organisation this large, compliance is really important. We need to guarantee that employees will receive and act on information in exactly the same way in Kaitaia as in Invercargill.

“The biggest gains have been people’s ability to read and write. Employees can fill out hazard identification reports, read safety signs and messages. Managers have noted the improved length and level of discussions taking place about these processes.”

Increased productivity

Spotless employees at Wellington Hospital initially had poor employee engagement levels, high absenteeism rates and low profit margins, he says.

“We worked closely with the contract manager to understand what impact low levels of language were having on the business. He most wanted to improve health and safety.

“We found that, after training, the reportable injury frequency rate moved from 27.3 to 0. In addition, food waste decreased by \$50,000 per annum, and employee absenteeism decreased by 38%. The contract is now profitable.”

Another example is the group of employees who attended literacy training at the company’s largest laundry plant in Point Chevalier, in Auckland.

IMPACT

38% decrease in employee absenteeism

“Previously, they were the employees who had the lowest literacy skills. But they were eventually promoted ahead of their peers.

“As laundry managers and supervisors improved their communication skills, they built more effective teams. They finally understood production goals. They had the confidence to raise suggestions for work improvements with their managers.”

More confident employees

Biggs says training has changed the way the business thinks.

“We are more confident both individually and organisationally. We feel better about ourselves.

“Literacy training became our stepping stone from cultural and commercial ineffectiveness to an environment of engagement and profitability.

“Client and union relationships have improved, employees are more engaged and we are a more profitable business.”



Spotless General Manager HR,
Vaughan Biggs

Research shows about 4 in 10 New Zealand working age adults have difficulties with reading, writing, maths and communication.

New Zealand’s poor adult literacy rates are considered a serious issue that cost businesses through accidents and injuries, high wastage, mistakes, missed deadlines and low productivity and profitability.

www.skillshighway.govt.nz promotes workplace literacy training to employers, and offers free resources and advice.

Read the case studies to find out how workplace literacy training is helping to tackle these problems.

The Department of Labour was integrated into the new Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment on 1 July 2012. All references to “Department of Labour” now refer to the Labour Group, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

New Zealand Government

