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Finding independence on the packing line

By Rose Mannering



A collaborative effort to move 10 solo parents who have been long term beneficiaries back into the workforce at the Longview packhouse near Hastings has been a great success, WINZ labour market advisor Robyn Leake says.

The programme is part of a region wide initiative called Project 1000 to create new jobs for unemployed Hawke's Bay workers. Between them, the group at Longview had accumulated 133 years on the benefit, although this also counted gaps where some of the participants had worked.

Project 1000 underpinned a three way partnership between:

- Mr Apple's Longview packhouse who provided five full-time positions, for 10 solo parents to job share. A minimum of 20 hours employment was guaranteed.
- Land Based Training, specialists in preparing unemployed people to go back to work provided training and pastoral care to the group.

Lisa Merito is returning to work five years after her son was born as part of the Project 1000 initiative. She has enjoyed working at the Mr Apple Longview packhouse from 11.15am – 4.30pm as part of a job sharing arrangement. She is in a similar financial position to when she is full-time on a benefit, but now possesses skills to progress into employment with increased hours.

"This has all been new to me; it has been great being helped into work. I am hoping in the off season to get work so I won't have to deal with WINZ," she says.

- Work and Income supplied screened candidates, funding, and also ongoing pastoral care and support.

Land Based Training employment coach Tim Bloor says the candidates were prepared for packhouse work through a short, sharp, relevant focussed training programme. The aim of the training was to develop confidence, reliability, motivation and a work ethic in the participants. NZQA Unit Standard qualifications were gained, and the group was moving toward gaining full drivers licences. Training topics included working as a team, sorting out childcare and transport, and managing IRD's Working for Families initiative. Other learnings included budgeting, fitness, diet & hydration, drug and alcohol management, computer literacy, and goal setting.

"The programme is a fantastic idea to help them through the exit process (from WINZ); for a number of the participants it has been quite a big shock after being on the benefit for a very long time; some have been on a benefit for all of their adult lives," Tim says. The women went through an adjustment period of making sure they got to work on time, planned their childcare, and how they would get to work.

"It is absolutely fantastic we have still got 10 working from 10 who started," he says.

Nothing was left to chance in the establishment of the programme. WINZ workbroker Glenn Gray carefully screened applicants and presented 13 for the programme; Longview HR Manager Peter Willis selected 10 to work in the packhouse. Peter says the level of professionalism from the participating parties has been high, and the 10 selected had the motivation to get through the packing season.

Selection began in November so by the time the harvest arrived in February, the participants were sorted and ready to work. The programme finished on July 7, and six of the 10 will be put forward to the greater Mr Apple group for further work.

The process hasn't been without hiccups, especially when children have fallen sick, but with active management from all parties, the outcome has been better than expected. Peter and Longview Staff Co-ordinator Roly Forrest say two-thirds of the group have been exceptional, while a few have struggled.

Roly says the change in the women has been marked as their confidence level has grown since they first started working at Longview in February. The top six have averaged three days off during the five months they have worked in the packhouse. Absenteeism has been an issue for Longview, as the packing line cannot run with gaps so anyone who doesn't turn up must be covered by somebody else.

Prior to the scheme, the women were on the Sole Parent benefit base rate of \$325.00 per week, with possibly additional financial supports added to this. WINZ advisor Robyn Leake says these women have been financially better off, working a guaranteed minimum 20 hours per week, than on a benefit. "What we have invested in the programme (covering extra sick days, and a top up during the cyclone when the packhouse closed for a day or two) is way ahead of where we would be if they were on the benefit." It represents a net saving for The Ministry for Social Development (MSD), but more importantly is changing the lives of these women and their families, she says.

Project 1000 is an initiative under the Hawke's Bay Regional Economic Development Strategy, Matariki. It brings together businesses, iwi, local authorities, training providers, and central government to support the creation of 1,000 new jobs for currently unemployed Hawke's Bay workers. Project 1000 is about new jobs across all industry sectors, but was initially developed in response to booming horticultural development where increased production out to 2020 will have corresponding increases in the need for a permanent and seasonal labour force. 🍏



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