



Shared ownership of health and safety boosts staff retention

At Waste Management’s Hutt Valley plant, workers sift through tonne upon tonne of cardboard, paper, plastic and glass sorting and separating materials for recycling, and removing anything that can’t be re-used.

The team faced two major challenges in lifting safety standards around handling waste – convincing senior management of the benefits and gaining buy-in from staff.

Involving workers has proved so successful that the waste sorting and recycling plant has significantly boosted staff retention, with zero turnover for the past four years.

It’s also created a culture where staff feel completely comfortable raising health and safety issues with managers.

“Everyone is equal here,” said Branch Manager Des Fell. “I was up on the line carrying out an audit and saw some contamination going through. I went to pick it up with my bare hands – and my staff said “Oi!”

The plant sorts and grades 3000 tonnes of recycling waste and 400 tonnes of glass every month. With the exception of a magnet and baler, the operation is entirely manual and workers often encounter sharp items like broken glass or needles.

“It’s not the easiest environment to work in but we make sure our people are looked after. Our staff retention speaks for itself”

Then Regional Health and Safety Advisor David Querido said a major issue was the need to provide better quality gloves.

“You’d be surprised what turns up in recycling. The standard gloves we were using weren’t performing well and people were getting cuts and puncture wounds. However, we had an issue with gloves regularly



being thrown away, so initially there was reluctance to purchase more expensive gloves. We needed a solution that addressed the glove issue and satisfied the business.”

NZ Safety was asked to provide samples of different gloves and workers tested these over several weeks, providing feedback on which were the most effective.

“There was a culture of chucking gloves away, and we needed to change that. Staff suggested buying a washing machine to address this issue.”

“We were able to demonstrate to the business that using better quality gloves and washing them saved money, improved safety and ensured better results,” said Querido.

H&S measures are also supported by regular toolbox meetings.

Fell said: “It’s an opportunity to share with the team what we might want to do about a particular health and safety issue. Then we ask people individually what they think. It gives people the chance to talk about any issues or raise suggestions.

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The beauty of it is that everyone knows there won’t be any negative consequences of speaking out. It’s interaction in an environment where people feel safe to bring stuff up and provides valuable feedback to help guide our H&S decisions.”

Half the workforce is Samoan so one of the Supervisors translates H&S messages for them. New staff are also fully inducted, including in risks and controls, before they step onto the plant floor.

Fell has an open door policy to his office. Supervisor Uta said: “We can just go to Des with any issue, like health and safety. If I see anyone doing something unsafe, I will approach them. The biggest impact has been in the delivery, with people really following health and safety messages.”

Fell said the entire team now “owns” health and safety as an integral part of their job.

“They have loved ones at home, they come to work and want to make sure they, and their colleagues alike, go home safe. This is a very family-orientated workplace. It’s not the easiest environment to work in but we make sure people are looked after – our staff retention speaks for itself.

WORKER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The best outcomes are achieved when a business and its workers work together on health and safety. Worker Engagement and Participation is about having planned ways for:

- > workers to give input on issues which will (or are likely to) affect their health or safety. This includes asking for and taking into account their views and
- > workers to improve work health and safety on an ongoing basis (eg by raising concerns or suggesting improvements).

This will help you and your business to make better decisions – and keep your people and productivity thriving.

KEY POINTS

- > Empowered workers.
- > Better choices of equipment.
- > Cost savings.
- > Zero staff turnover in four years.

For more examples and information visit worksafe.govt.nz

