

SEPTEMBER 2019



## BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP - ONE REGION AT A TIME

With a shortage of skilled candidates in the trades sector, combined with an increasingly ageing workforce, many businesses are urgently calling out for skilled labour across New Zealand. One innovative Hastings-based business has embarked on an ambitious programme to address the nationwide skills shortage, one region at a time.

Directors of Patton Engineering, Johnno Williams and Andrew Burn, were struggling to find enough staff and noticed a shortage of young people entering the engineering field. They concluded that a long-term solution was required if the trades industry was to continue thriving.

Intuitively, they saw a need to promote the trades profession among young people to showcase the career prospects within the industry. With only 30 percent of kids coming out of high school going on to university, the pair realised that there was a significant pool of students that could potentially be directed into the trades industry; they just needed to be able to see the opportunities.

### ➔ PROGRAMME STATS

- 600 students enrolled for Technology Workshops, now at full capacity.
- 23 businesses, and growing, backing the initiative.
- 8 students per fortnight receive hands-on training at Patton Engineering.
- 3 students awarded apprenticeships in the first year.
- \$160,000 total investment provided towards new school equipment and resources.



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- JOHNNO WILLIAMS, MANAGING DIRECTOR, PATTON ENGINEERING



## THE SKILLS SOLUTION

To this end, Williams and Burn set about partnering with local Hastings Boys’ High School (HBHS), which provides trades training for senior students in Years 11, 12 and 13. At the time, the school had one year 11 and one combined year 12-13 class of students studying engineering, but limited class resources such as gas and welding equipment – key tools of the trade.

The initiative was viewed as an opportunity to expose students to different career pathways, while giving them hands-on experience in the field of heavy engineering. As well as providing mentorship in the form of hands-on tuition for 30 Year 12 students, Patton Engineering wanted to set up HBHS with up-to-date equipment and materials relevant to the steel fabrication industry that would enable students to go from

creating steel pencil cases to barbeques and, ultimately, to be inspired by the possibilities within the field.

To this end, Patton Engineering partnered with One Foundation Trust in Rotorua and other local businesses to provide funds, equipment, materials and resources. The school has since been equipped with eight new state-of-the-art welding machines and Patton Engineering has designed and manufactured a new welding workshop to accommodate the new machines with individual welding bays.

The trial programme with HBHS has been so successful that not only have other engineering businesses such as McLaren Stainless and DSK jumped on board, but HBHS’s technology department is becoming the envy of other schools around the country with modern equipment and a healthy stockpile of materials.

The partnership with Patton Engineering has had significant benefits all round, says HBHS Head of Technology Salla Delport.

“Since the programme’s inception, the workshops have seen major upgrades including a 4mm steel plate guillotine and roller, heavy fabrication equipment, mill drills, pedestal drills, plasma cutter, etc all with the support of Patton Engineering, One Foundation and other stakeholders,” says Delport. “Grassroots Trust also supported the initiative with their sponsorship of power tools across the technology workshops.

“It is giving students valuable career opportunities, providing significant benefits for our school, whilst also helping to resolve a nationwide skill’s shortage.

“Students are able to see the potential career opportunities by learning both at



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school and at the engineering firms. They can see the opportunity to get a job, to earn money, and to have a profession that will stand them in good stead for the future,” says Delport.

HBHS student Ektaj Singh, one of three boys selected for an apprenticeship with Patton Engineering, says the hands-on experience he’s gained has given him the career direction he was lacking.

“I had no idea what I wanted to do after graduating,” says Singh. “Learning on the job gave me the opportunity to work out what I wanted to do after high school, and I learned some really good life skills along the way.

“Andrew, Johnno and the other guys I work with have been amazing mentors and hugely supportive.”

A year on from the programme launch,

more than 23 businesses have jumped on board and HBHS now has 600 students learning some form of technology in a well kitted-out workshop at school, with regular placements at three engineering workshops and career pathways.

### **A WIN-WIN-WIN**

The idea has certainly paid off in dividends – both the school and Patton Engineering are currently viewed by the education sector and the engineering fraternity as the model school and career programme, respectively.

From Delport’s perspective, the technology initiative is narrowing the gap between Technology teaching at school level and what the industry requires from young apprentices in terms of skills and work ethic.

“We have been fortunate to experience

significant upgrading to our machinery, tools and skill levels at school through ongoing donations and grants from the likes of One Foundation,” says Delport. “As the driving force behind the initiative, the professional guidance and quality support provided by Patton Engineering to the teaching staff and students have been immeasurable.

“By all parties working together on this initiative, the future pathways and transition for our students from school to industry become seamless, with students entering the workforce with outstanding welding and fabrication skills.”

### **MOVING FORWARD**

Williams says the aim of the initiative was always to create a model to roll out anywhere in the country and pave the way for other companies to follow,



creating opportunities across different industry sectors for school leavers.

Before they move on, however, Williams and Burn are keen to finish what they started. The number of students wanting to get involved in the Engineering workshops doubled this year alone, and students are being turned away. Patton Engineering is also assisting HBHS with further funding to help increase workshop space to keep up

with demand. There are also plans to raise an additional \$120,000 to go towards a full refit of the workshops with new equipment and tools.

“As the largest diversified engineering employer in the Hawke’s Bay, we have a moral obligation to give back to our community,” says Williams. “We want our 13-year olds to know what they want to do when they grow up, helping them to

choose the right subjects to complement their learning by giving them the opportunity to see what it’s like to be a plumber, electrician, engineer or builder.

“This has been the most powerful thing to come out of this programme for us and we couldn’t have done it without the help of all the businesses that have come on board. This is a journey we aim to see through for the next 20 years,” says Williams.

**To discuss or contribute to the programme, please contact Johno Williams on [johno@patton.co.nz](mailto:johno@patton.co.nz)**

