

Rangitikei
UNSPOILT...



**THE NEW ZEALAND POST MANAGEMENT EXCELLENCE AWARDS
2006**

Rangitikei CareerStart

an entry for

The New Zealand Post Community Relationships Award

17 young people aged between 17 and 23 entered into career opportunities with 12 different private employers throughout the District – from Bulls up to Taihape, from construction to adventure tourism – and the Rangitikei District Council during the year ending 30 June 2006

Leigh Halstead
Chief Executive
Rangitikei District Council

20 July 2006

1. Giving young people in the Rangitikei a career start close to home

Rangitikei's demographics show a hollowing out of 18-24 year olds because of educational and employment opportunities outside the District. This trend has a wide range of impacts on community life – such as reducing the injection of fresh ideas into the many service, leisure and creative organisations throughout the District and reducing the potential market for educational providers. During the recent LTCCP process, a submission from a youth forum convened by the Council noted “we need more opportunities – more, better jobs...we need communities where people feel welcome and safe...” Young people see improved employment opportunities as the key to the Rangitikei's future.

2. Giving small employers an opportunity to increase their business with financial and management support

Rangitikei's employers are overwhelmingly small. The latest business demographic statistics (February 2005) show that 90% of the District's businesses have a mean employee count of 2.6 employees. These are outside manufacturing, health and other government services. Taking on one additional employee is often perceived as a significant risk – the additional financial cost of the employee plus the down time in additional supervision and training – a view heightened for those running their own business with no or minimal other employees. *CareerStart* provides employers with a subsidised placement, a grant towards training, and access to external supervision from the Project Co-ordinator.

3. Demonstrating the Council's willingness to work with the local community

Since adopting a new business and economic development plan in early 2004, the Council has looked for a stronger working relationship with businesses – particularly through those who accepted membership of the steering groups on agriculture, downstream processing and tourism. In addition, in 2005, the Council appointed a full-time Economic Development Leader, to support those steering groups and to ensure small-to-medium businesses took maximum advantage of central government training and investment programmes. *CareerStart* has intensified that interaction between Council and business.

4. Alignment with the Council's vision – “Making our District thrive”

The Council reviewed its mission statement in 2005. It captures the Council's conviction that, irrespective of statutory obligations, its essential justification to the community is that it is making the District a better place to live, work and relax in.

5. Demonstrating Council's commitment to the Mayors Task Force for Jobs

The Council joined the Task Force comparatively late. It relished the opportunity to partner with the central government agencies supporting the Task Force and demonstrate the considerable leverage available to a predominantly rural district with a high number of small businesses to achieve the *youth guarantee* – all young

people under 25 being in paid work in training or education, or in worthwhile activities in our communities.

We managed the project well

Effective project management techniques

1. Close consideration over funding agreement with sponsoring agency

The Chief Executive and the Human Resources Advisor spent considerable time in reviewing and rewriting drafts of the funding agreement to be certain that expectations of the Council matched those of the Ministry of Social Development.

2. Collaboration over recruitment of Project Co-ordinator

The Council involved the Ministry of Social Development in both the design of the job description for the Project Co-ordinator and the selection of the appointee.

3. Staged implementation of project

The first four cadets were deliberately placed within the Council, to gain experience in the working relationships with Work and Income and in developing the induction programmes. While media publicity was arranged when *CareerStart* began, the approach to employers was deliberately low-key, with the emphasis of socialising them to the concept and talking through the implications of an additional young employee.

4. Regular review meetings with stakeholders and participants associated with flexible and timely responses

The Project Co-ordinator had twice-weekly meetings with the Council's Human Resources Advisor, at least one meeting a week with the Marton Work and Income office, and regular engagement with employers and cadets. A critical supplement to this commitment was the Co-ordinator's willingness to meet with stakeholders, employers or cadets where they had or foresaw a problem and issue.

5. Formal reporting to Council and funding agency

In addition to the regular reports required by the Ministry of Social Development, the Project Co-ordinator provided a monthly update for inclusion in the Chief Executive's report to Council.

The business community was intrigued, and willing to give it a go

A participatory approach to communicating with and getting 'buy-in' from stakeholders associated with the project

1. Potential employers identified through local knowledge

The appointed Project Co-ordinator had established links into the business community in Marton which greatly facilitated informal discussion, understanding and interest in the *CareerStart* project.

2. Employers' criteria the determinant of a placement

The Project Co-ordinator took the employer's criteria and considered potential cadets for suitability before suggesting interviews. Because the goal is long-term, sustainable employment, a good fit is crucial. Employers were not pressured to accept a cadet.

3. Assistance to employers in getting cadets properly established

The Project Co-ordinator helped employers negotiate the formalities of starting a new employee and to understand the training implications of *CareerStart* (and the funding assistance associated with that).

4. Project Co-ordinator became a business mentor

Most of the employers who joined *CareerStart* sought advice from the Project Co-ordinator on matters of business practice and performance, beyond those directly related to the cadet. In addition, in the few instances when termination became necessary, the Co-ordinator worked with the employer (and Work and Income) to ensure a fair and defensible outcome.

5. Close liaison with Work and Income

Regular liaison with the local office of Work and Income has been crucial in making the project work smoothly and to address particular issues as they arose. Media publicity has consistently associated Work and Income with *CareerStart*. A function in early July to celebrate the completion of the first year included the Ministry of Social Development's Regional Commissioner as one of the guests.

Rangitikei has been a useful model for other local authorities

Innovation and originality in the specific award category area

1. Three-way partnership attractive for other small councils

The prototype for *CareerStart* was the programme developed at the New Plymouth District Council. However, there all cadets were employed by the Council and none in the private sector. For a small Council with around 50 employees (instead of the 430 at New Plymouth) a cadet scheme could be viable only through substantial engagement in the project by private employers. We are aware that Rangitikei's approach has been discussed by the Ministry of Social Development with other local authorities.

2. Project Co-ordinator the broker between the employer and Work and Income

Normally, subsidised employment programmes are arranged by Work and Income direct with employers. *CareerStart* places the Project Co-ordinator firmly as their intermediary –

The final decision as to the suitability of a potential participant will be at the discretion of the Co-ordinator and employers, and the Co-ordinator will have the right to interview and select the group of clients for the programme.

This changes the dynamics considerably, requiring both Work and Income and employers to alter their thinking about the relationship and the Project Co-ordinator to act as the *de facto* quality control in this.

3. Council applying learning from the project to better target its assistance for small businesses wanting to grow

The largest private sector employer to have accepted a cadet had 30 other employees. Over half of the employers accepting a cadet had fewer than two employees. Because of the close rapport built up by the Project Co-ordinator with such businesses, Council has come to understand a number of key barriers to growth other than those identified through various economic development initiatives. These barriers are:

- lack of understanding about employment contract requirements
- uncertainty how to access relevant external training opportunities and the funding support available for these
- inadequate internal policies and procedures to guide new employees without constant reference to the employer.

This is influencing Council's thinking in its current review of business incentives strategy.

4. Monthly life skills training to position the cadets as contributing community citizens as well as successful employees

The objective of *CareerStart* is to assist the cadets to secure meaningful and satisfying lives within the community – in which long-term employment is an integral but not the only part. Many of the cadets have not had access to training to enable them to capitalise on life's opportunities, to overcome problems, enjoy good health, and to understand how to develop their own character. The Project Co-ordinator has developed a series of modules on life skills which are delivered on a monthly basis to all the cadets. Health professionals have also provided sessions on nutrition and healthy eating, and drugs and alcohol.

5. Platform for a pilot youth mentoring scheme

The close association with a group of young people has been the prompt to apply for (and secure) funding for a one-year pilot project (in 2006/07) to establish a sustainable youth mentoring programme in the Rangitikei. The cadets in *CareerStart* will be the target group for this project, with the objective of getting them to step up into community leadership roles.

Increased capacity for workers and employers

Successful results, in both financial and non-financial terms

1. Initial quota increased from 14 to 20 cadets

As employers became aware of *CareerStart*, they initiated a number of requests to the Co-ordinator which exceeded the limit of 14 set in the funding agreement (four within Council and 10 in the private sector). We requested a higher limit on the understanding that no additional funding for the Council would be required. The Ministry of Social Development considered that the overall limit could be increased to 20 (i.e. 16 in the private sector).

2. Reduction in unemployment

Every person on *CareerStart* is a reduction in the District's unemployed. 25% of the current cadets are Māori.

3. 80% of cadets in the private sector certain of longer-term employment

Preliminary discussions with private sector employers have created fairly realistic expectations of *CareerStart* with the result that of the 13 cadets currently in private sector employment, all have strong prospects of remaining with that employer well beyond the first year. Two employers have arranged for apprenticeships, and another three have encouraged their cadets to embark on tertiary studies. All employers are considering or have already placed cadets into formal industry specific training – via the relevant ITO or through short courses by training professionals. The major reason for truncated employment for a cadet has been an employer's decision to sell or relocate the business.

4. Generation mix at Council's workplace

The four cadets at the Council have brought a youthful dimension into that workplace – and to its customer service interface, both in the main Marton office as well as the Marton Public Library. The benefit of youthful talent and enthusiasm has extended from rejuvenated holiday activity programmes at the Marton Library to a higher profile for Marton office staff to be more physically active.

5. Project kept within budget

The Council entered into the funding agreement with the Ministry of Social Development in the expectation that ratepayer funds would not be needed to underwrite any unforeseen aspects of *CareerStart*. That expectation has been met.

We're just entering our second year

The project was a 'good, sensible and right thing to do'

The Ministry of Social Development is about to finalise a funding agreement for a second year on similar terms as for 2005/06 – a clear recognition that the Council has delivered to the Ministry's satisfaction.

Young people are keen to be considered as cadets for 2006/07 as Rangitikei *CareerStart* is seen as providing a real chance for long-term employment and skill development.

Potential employers can see the benefits from the experiences of those employers who grasped the opportunity in the first year of the project.

The wider community is strongly supportive of the Council's initiative in youth employment.

20 July 2006