

# 'Cross-fit' initiative to prepare work-ready newcomers for logistics roles

By Walter Glass

In the Oct/Nov '16 edition of FTD, we talked about taking the classroom to the real world of the logistics and supply chain sector, and the task of aligning industry needs to school outputs. This article is an update on the situation and an outline of an initiative involving the Manawatu-Whanganui Central Economic Development Agency and lower North Island logistics businesses.

Recent statistics now show that 70% of secondary school leavers in New Zealand are opting out of going to university for their tertiary education, and of the remaining 30% that do enter university, about half will fail or leave without obtaining a qualification. Moreover, those who take on tertiary education, graduating or not, are leaving with massive levels of debt that will take many years to repay. More sobering still is the observation that, on a comparative basis, New Zealand places less emphasis on higher educational qualifications than most other first-world countries, but favours experience instead – so not a particularly positive perspective for a young graduate exiting university with a large student debt and no work experience. This is causing many school leavers and their parents (the traditional student 'money tree' to which I have alluded in past articles) to critically examine the quality, relevance and actual costs of the programmes that schools offer, including how well the secondary education system is preparing New Zealand students for entry into the workforce and adulthood.

## Woefully unprepared

The schools have not fared too well in this examination. Their end products (i.e. the students) are woefully unprepared for their cross-over from school to either work or tertiary study. Frequently, however, the students have neither the relevant academic skills nor personal discipline that the workplace (i.e. the customer) requires. Students can also suffer illusions as to their real 'value' in the workplace and are quite mortified when the boss does not want to hear their opinion on a particular issue. This is an unfair situation for all parties, and unacceptable for the future. The main problem is the current disconnect between what an industry needs and what schools

either understand and/or provide. In short, it is very difficult to attract school leavers to an industry sector if the teachers are entirely oblivious as to what skills that sector requires.

Most teachers know what a doctor, accountant, lawyer, and certainly a teacher, does at work, but they are not so conversant with the role of a maritime engineer, stevedore, procurement officer, logistics manager or supply chain network planner. They probably have an inkling as to what a truck driver or a warehouse person does, but it is probably a rather blinkered image, with little understanding of the constant changes and complexity of the information & communication technology (ICT) and artificial intelligence systems (AIS) that are emerging in these sectors. Industry must be involved.

Teachers and careers advisors will understandably head to their default position and promote the jobs they know about personally. Unfortunately, this means that a significant number of school leavers and graduates are almost entirely unaware of what the very large logistics sector is searching for in terms of talent, and the wide variety of cross-functional skill-sets that are transferable across the activities that are incorporated within this sector. Talent as defined by schools and industry is a word with several interpretations and often not a lot of alignment between these parties.

## Getting the message across

But is the logistics sector sending the right message to schools? Employers need people who have the right attitude and aptitude for the job they want filled, and part of this is having the required enthusiasm and base skills to perform in the role. Often this requirement is not expressed clearly enough by industry. The logistics and supply chain sector itself has spent considerable time trying to attract



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'work-ready' newcomers, both as operatives within the multitude of roles across the sector and as technicians – including tradespeople that align with the sector, such as mechanics and engineers, or IT people. The shortage of talent is now clearly evident. Unfortunately, industry job descriptions are often poles apart for roles with very similar skill-sets. Alternately, the description may be too detailed, and many roles being advertised give no idea of the salary range, thus becoming a frustrating and time-wasting exercise for an applicant. If industry wants talent and skills, then it needs to put a price tag in the window. If there are no takers, then the answer is clear! In addition, employers and recruiters within the sector are, themselves, often too loose with jargon in describing the skills required. Describing a role as being in transport or distribution says nothing about it being in the logistics sector; but if you are in the business of getting the right thing in the right place, at the right time at an acceptable cost – or your work supports entities that do – then you are either part of, or inextricably linked to, this sector, whether you are in warehousing, transport, civil and heavy equipment construction, operations or marine engineering, to name but a few. Teachers, careers advisors and students need better job descriptions to understand how the role fits with the skill-sets they have available.

## Work-ready students

In 2016, the Logistics Training

Group (LTG) began working with Ken Benn, academic dean at Palmerston North Boys' High School, on the concept of a logistics and supply chain related programme for senior school pupils. The objective was to provide a programme that would not only bridge the gap between school and employment, but also prepare the students to enter their chosen roles in a work-ready state.

This work-ready status is not claiming the student is entirely competent in their new supply chain role, but will at least have base skills and an understanding of what the role encompasses so that they at least possess an awareness of what is going on onsite. Their employer will then train them in the specific skill-sets required for the role they take on, and this will evolve over time assuming there is a good 'fit' between both parties. The skills envisaged for these students were an awareness of site health and safety, forklift and class 2 licences, and some concept courses in logistics-related activities such as warehousing and transport, engineering and mechanical apprenticeships, ICT opportunities in logistics and so on. In short, the objective was to integrate school and workplace skills in a 'cross-fit' style training programme in which students will have an option to become work-ready while they finish their final year at school and also cover off some basic readily applicable skills for any workplace. The emphasis is not on unit standards so much as competence.

This should provide employers with new people who have the right attitude and aptitude for the many roles on offer, and these two factors are critical for success. The sector realises that not everyone will find a job they like first time out, and that's fine – have another go, but learn something on the way through (you'll probably use it later). Trial and error is a given.

## The CEDA initiative

The Manawatu-Whanganui Central Economic Development Agency (CEDA) recently commissioned a study to identify underlying opportunities for the lower North Island region and confirmed what had been generally accepted by the logistics sector for some time:

1. Palmerston North and its immediate surrounds is a national 'logistics centre of gravity'
2. There is a shortage of work-ready new people in the region who are adequately skilled and motivated to move into the current and future roles in logistics, particularly in the sub-sectors of road transport and warehousing/distribution. CEDA has acted as a regional facilitator, providing a forum for industry, schools, tertiary institu-

tions and vocational educators to engage and seek solutions. CEDA is also working closely with Talent Central, a facilitation initiative funded by the schools that provides a conduit between schools and industry. The first industry meeting has been held and another is scheduled shortly. The Talent Central representative has brought the schools' perspective to the table, and plans are being formulated to bring together the educators and practitioners so that a more informed careers pathway option can be built to open doors to what is the biggest integrated sector in the country.

The concept is to have schools working with industry training organisations, vocational educators and tertiary institutions to smooth the transition from school to the workforce with work-ready students being prepared for their future roles. Priority skills/needs that have been identified in the region are for truck and forklift drivers, warehouse and distribution centre operatives and technicians/mechanics for the heavy machinery sector. This is expected to expand rapidly to other industries over the next two years.

## National coverage

As many FTD readers will be aware, LTG has been a vocational and applied tertiary-level educator in this sector for over 20 years. It has been working with technical institutions, UCOL, Massey University's supply chain programme, Talent Central and industry on this model with the intention of spreading it nationwide once the concept is proven. The logistics sector is full of developing technologies and the uptake rate is phenomenal. Many activities that are everyday logistics functions now will change substantially within the next 10 years. In transport and warehousing alone, vehicles and materials handling equipment will be driverless within five years or less. Imagine a warehouse where there are no forklift operators on machines – just a single person in an exterior office who may control around 10–15 machines at two to three sites, but will

only manually operate a machine remotely if its system decides it is too difficult for the machine, and human intervention is required. This technology is here now, but it will not mean that people are no longer required – simply that their skills will change to meet the technology evolution. The jobs that companies want to attract people to now are going to be changing, re-adjusting and evolving constantly in the near future, so if nothing else, they will be very interesting, providing constant challenges through rapidly developing technologies such as AI, robotics, virtual reality, 'big data', 3D printing and autonomous machines. These technologies are here now, and they are exciting times ahead. The day is rapidly approaching where innovative companies will be recruiting students directly from school and footing the bill for their tertiary education, providing work-ready graduates for their own businesses.



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