

Bill Bamber – “You learn by drinking the milk”

Bill Bamber started work as a young man in the orchards of Hawke’s Bay, but a will to succeed, staying loyal to his home town and a wise move to gain a recognised qualification has resulted in a satisfying and successful career in transport. This is his story.

Like a lot of boys who left school in the ‘80s, I had no idea what I wanted to do. My father introduced me to one of his mates, a guy called Jonny, who ran an orchard in Hawke’s Bay – a top bloke and a tough taskmaster, who I credit for teaching me there is nothing free in life, and the harder you work the luckier you get.

As part of my two-year apprenticeship on the orchard I had to get my HT and trailer licence to cart the apples from the orchard to the Apple and Pear Board in Hastings. To be fair, the test wasn’t difficult – the officer was happy with his box of apples!

When working for Jonny you quickly learnt that you only stuff up once, so losing a load of empty bins down Omaha Road only happened to me once in those years.

I went off to Massey University, but returned to Hawke’s Bay through the summer holidays to drive for my uncle who had a truck with Bushett’s Transport in Waipukurau. We carted peas to the Unilever factory in Hastings from farms all over Hawke’s Bay. We earned good money on the night shift – enough to have great skiing holidays throughout university.

From truck driver to salesman

After an OE, I took up sales roles with Shell Oil and Lion Breweries. The latter was a great job at the time for a young man! I was approached by a friend that was working for Mainfreight in Auckland. He told me the Wellington branch was looking for a sales rep,



Bill Bamber, general manager of KAM Transport:
“I love the transport industry, its people and the customers that make it so enjoyable”

so I applied and got the role. Mainfreight Wellington was a great place to work. The team there in the early ‘90s was hard working and certainly knew how to burn the candle at both ends. I was taught ‘the Mainfreight way’ and spent six months on the floor before I was allowed out on the road.

The conferences in those days were huge social occasions with all sales and management coming together to be addressed by Bruce Plested and Neil Graham. I had great teachers back then – Mainfreight had just bought Daily Freight, so Wally Wright and Don Braid were managing the sales team.

What changed my direction within the freight industry was that I knew I needed to have some form of qualification to move up from sales into a branch manager’s role. I looked around for a course and found the Diploma of Logistics run by Massey University. Mainfreight at this time didn’t recognise the need for such education – ‘you learn by drinking the milk’ as they say in transport. So I decided to fund the course myself, knowing that once I achieved the diploma it would set me up to apply for more senior roles within transport.

The start of better things

The diploma opened my eyes to warehousing and people management. I continued to work at Mainfreight while studying, utilising the principles that I was learning. Being a Wellington boy I didn’t want to leave to take up a role in Auckland. It made sense to stay put, complete the diploma and find a branch manager’s position somewhere in Wellington.

I graduated in 1997; I believe my year group were some of the first to complete the diploma, and it was the start of better things. Fliway was advertising for a branch manager, so I applied and got the job based on my experience with Mainfreight, coupled with passing the diploma. The fact I had put myself through the course meant they were prepared to take a risk and employ someone who hadn’t run a team before. At that time, Fliway was based in a terrible location in Miramar that meant we were losing a lot of time having to deliver via the Mt Victoria tunnel. I convinced the owners that logistically we needed to move to improve profitability by being better located to our clients and State Highway 1. I ended up taking on the challenging role of project manager for our new facility in Ngauranga Gorge, with the

weight of the owners’ expectation that this had better work. We ended up building a warehouse and transport hub that is still in use today in one of the best locations for transport in Wellington. The old story of ‘build it, they will come’ came to fruition within three years – we filled the warehouse and exceeded our expectations.

Staying put in the capital

I moved on when I felt that again I had hit the ceiling within Fliway Wellington. Not wanting to shift from Wellington meant I had to find roles within the capital. This got harder in the 2000s when companies started to move out of Wellington believing Auckland was the future for logistics in New Zealand.

To be fair, I haven’t struggled to find roles in business development within the logistics industry. I had stints with TransLink as their supply chain manager for the cen-

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