

CASE STUDY:

HOW APPRENTICESHIPS HELP TACKLE SKILLS SHORTAGES AND AN AGEING WORKFORCE

COMPANY: Aspen Commercial Interiors

HOTSPOT REGION: New England/ North West

TARGET:

1. The benefits of apprenticeships and traineeships for entry level workers
2. Encouraging employers to engage School Based Apprentices
3. Encouraging employers to provide opportunities to local refugee communities


Aspen Commercial Interiors is a leading Australian Manufacturer of Office Furniture & Joinery, based in Armidale, in the New England region of NSW.

The business has experienced ongoing challenges attracting qualified staff, resulting in most employees joining Aspen without any relevant skills or qualifications. Attracting young people has also been a challenge, as historically, school leavers are encouraged to choose university pathways over a trade. Another challenge for the region is the migration of local youth to larger cities to pursue employment opportunities, instead of building their careers in a regional town. Due to the local skills shortage, jobs are often awarded to jobseekers based on attitude, and their desire to obtain the appropriate skills.

Aspen have introduced 2 initiatives which are helping tackle this critical local skills shortage; firstly the introduction of the School-Based Traineeship and Apprenticeship (SBAT) program, and secondly, providing employment opportunities to the local refugee community. Both of these are having a positive impact on the business.

The SBAT program has improved Aspen's connections with schools and is providing meaningful career paths for local students. High school Career Advisors are a critical element in the success of this, providing opportunities for Aspen's staff to attend career workshops to promote future job opportunities. To ensure the school-based program is a success, Aspen follow an industry "best practice" model for recruitment, which includes conducting information sessions with students and parents, outlining the opportunities and expectations of the trade, providing work experience opportunities to trial candidates and using Skillsroad's psychology based Career Quiz and Job-Fit Test tools to ensure the candidate is suited to a career in the furnishing industry. In 2020, Aspen hired 4 local students as School-Based Apprentices.

Aspen has developed strong connections with industry stakeholders including Peter Rickard of Apprenticeship Support Australia and Alison Dundon of Training Services NSW to help navigate the red tape and to maximise the government financial assistance available to help grow the program.



Aspen Commercial Interiors encourages other businesses to explore the many benefits that the SBAT program brings. It has helped established direct and easy access to a pool of keen young people who want to study, train and develop skills in the industry. It provides a supportive environment for youth to make a more successful transition from school to work. Inexperienced workers can be trained and mentored to establish good work practices from an early stage, to not only provide the underlying fundamental foundation skills in the discipline but to also develop staff to the specific business needs. Financially, apprentices provide greater production capacity and keeps the business competitive, particularly given the additional costs associated with being remotely based. Additional to this, the full cost of formal training is currently subsidised, and coupled with the commonwealth incentives, it allows Aspen to upskill its entry level workers at minimum cost and to expand its skilled labour force to meet current and projected production needs.

As a regional based business, the owners and their families live in the community, and the local community has embraced the refugee community. Aspen is tapping into this market to help support their community integration and provide new skills and values to the business. Aspen have found these workers have an extremely high drive to succeed. This positive attitude, appreciation of the opportunity and commitment to learn and succeed brings many benefits to the business. Employment is also helping refugee workers overcome their language barrier, which is identified as their greatest hurdle in gaining and retaining employment.

The above creates capacity and opportunity to develop and grow. It is however a long-term strategy which will result in more qualified staff which in turn creates the capacity to take on more complex projects. Aspen have found that engaging and motivating employees improves productivity, quality and safety. Offering skill development and career pathway opportunities to all employees, particularly the entry level workforce, delivers a message that everyone is valued. This supports the building of a positive culture where everyone feels they belong, attracting the best people to the business and retaining them as highly skilled productive employees.