

Kia Puāwai

An innovative South Auckland employment partnership that is making a difference

Project Summary:

As part of Auckland Council's commitment to improving employment outcomes for South Auckland, its Customer Services department initiated a highly successful programme to bring local people who are currently unemployed into its contact centre workforce. The Kia Puāwai programme involves a partnership between

- Auckland Council – which offers permanent employment opportunities in Manukau,
- the local Manukau office of Work and Income (WINZ)– which helps identify potential candidates, and
- the Solomon Group – a Māori training provider which offers a 12-week training course in contact centre skills.

Successful candidates are offered not only a job in their local area, but the prospect of a genuine career in an organisation with 8000 employees and many opportunities.

This programme provides a life-changing opportunity for the graduates, a reliable source of motivated staff for the contact centre, and sustainable benefits for the community.

Strategic Context

Many of New Zealand's poorest people live in South Auckland, which has a high Māori and Pasifika population.

Of 64 NZ electorates, the three with the highest rates of unemployment are all in South Auckland: Manurewa, Mangere and Manukau East. Only 38% of people in South Auckland are in work, and the average yearly income is \$20,000.

Auckland Council has recognised the need in South Auckland through specific goals in its 30-year Auckland Plan and the establishment of The Southern Initiative (TSI), which is a place-based regeneration programme. Three of the focus areas in Auckland Council's 30-year Auckland Plan are to

- advance Māori wellbeing,
- strengthen employment outcomes and
- to serve communities of greatest need.

In 2017, the Customer Services department consolidated six council contact centres, and based the new contact centre in Manukau. The goal was to provide permanent employment opportunities in South Auckland – specifically for people struggling to find employment.

Just offering jobs has been done for years by many organisations with limited success. We wanted to create a programme that would ensure sustained results and benefits for both the recruits and the Council. The outcome of an unemployed person gaining a permanent job has a ripple effect on their family and community, improving their skills, finances and long-term outlook.

Risks for this initiative included:

- selecting the right candidates who would stay the course and become good employees
- issues around childcare and transport, which can derail people's ability to do the training or turn up to the job
- lack of work habits and resilience to sustain ongoing employment
- ensuring enough support for recruits who will inevitably require more resources and organisational flexibility.

These risks were mitigated by:

- 1) having a dedicated project manager (the Talent Partnership Manager)
- 2) partnering with WINZ (to identify potential candidates and resolve issues with benefits and allowances) and the Solomon Group (which offers both training and pastoral care)
- 3) focusing beyond contact centre skills to a range of other skills such as developing resilience and confidence, goal-setting, writing, and financial management
- 4) developing a "nesting" approach after induction of successful graduates to provide significant work support and an easeful transition into solo work on the phone.



Project Management

Scope: The initial scope was to focus on recruits for the contact centre only, and to run two courses in a year. The initial timeframe was to launch it in 2018.

A project manager was employed in November 2017. Partnerships with WINZ and the Solomon Group were established in December 2017, and the recruitment of candidates began in January 2018. The first 12-week training course began at the end of February.

The outcome was so successful that the decision was made to run three courses in 2018, with the aim of providing up to 30 new staff annually. This target was met.

Resources: Customer Services provides a project manager for the initiative, as well as giving the students training and/or buddying one day a week at Auckland Council premises.

Governance: The programme is run by the Talent Partnership Manager (TPM) of Customer Services, and further governance is provided by the Manager of the People Excellence unit and the General Manager of Customer Services.

Evaluation: Ongoing evaluation is provided by the course tutor, the TPM, council trainers and contact centre team leaders. Students are regularly assessed during the course under the NZQA framework. Students are offered a job with Auckland Council once they pass a standard assessment centre, run by the Customer Services department.

Feedback from the students, course tutors, TPM, and contact centre team leaders is regularly gathered to check on progress, refine course topics and modify the programme. For instance, concern expressed by the first group of students about going solo on the phones resulted in the development of the “nesting” phase, where graduates are given intensive support for their first month on the job.

Quality Assurance: During the first week of nesting, the Quality Assurance team measures the performance of each graduate, to get a baseline against which to measure their performance improvements. The course gives students 40 points towards a 60-point Level 3 Contact Centre Skills certificate. The remaining 20 points are given by an independent NZQA assessor once they’ve proved their skills on the job.

Relationship Management

The key stakeholders were Auckland Council, WINZ, and the Solomon Group. The initiative was launched following a number of meetings with all stakeholders, both individually and together, to ensure alignment on the initiative’s purpose and processes.

Many different communication tools were used to achieve strong and effective relationships. To recruit candidates from the widest range of sources in the local community:

- WINZ did outreach to unemployed people through case managers and work Expos. People were contacted through text, email and face-to-face.
- The Talent Partnership Manager and course tutor then ran a series of seminars for people to learn about the programme, and did interviews with all likely candidates.
- The Solomon Group used Facebook to do outreach to all their networks, as well using the networks of their recruitment and employment teams.

- In Auckland Council, the Talent Partnership Manager contacted the TSI team, and did a presentation to a group of women in Papakura.

Throughout the course, there were regular phone calls and meetings between the TPM and the course tutor, as well as occasional visits to the class by the contact centre manager and Customer Service General Manager. A WINZ case manager also visited the class regularly.

The General Manager liaised with the executive leadership team of Auckland Council, and kept them informed about the progress of the initiative. The success of this relationship management is evidenced by the regular attendance of the Chief Executive of Auckland Council, the Regional Commissioner of MSD and the Chief Executive of Aspire (which owns the Solomon Group) at the graduations of the course participants.

Continuous Improvement

A formal review of the programme is currently underway. This review will provide an independent assessment of what has worked, what hasn't, and what changes need to be made in the future.

Each intake of students has had its own set of challenges, which means we are continually improving the programme: refining the curriculum, intensifying the recruitment process, and developing more follow-up for the recruits during their first year of employment.

Recruitment criteria have recently been tightened. The third course was not as successful as the first two, so the acceptance criteria were reviewed. While motivation to work remains a key criterion, there are now additional tests for basic levels of literacy, numeracy and computing skills.

The allowance for any leave during the course has also been tightened, with students informed that any absences from the course may jeopardise their opportunity to work for Auckland Council.

As each cohort of students has graduated, there has been interest from other teams and departments across the council. Beyond the contact centre, graduates have been given jobs in the service centres and the regulatory dispatch centre. Future plans include outreach to consents departments and administration teams.

The key evidence of sustainability is the fact that the initiative is now in its second year, and that the Auckland Council contact centre manager intends to make this his major source of recruits. Kia Puāwai is now considered 'business as usual' in terms of recruitment, induction and training in the contact centre. This is manifest in the development of a recruitment calendar for 2019 and 2020 that plans for three Kia Puāwai intakes over the course of each year.

Project Success

The pilot course had outstanding results, with almost all students completing the full course, and 90% of the graduates getting permanent employment. These graduates all say their new jobs have been life-changing for them. They have a new sense of purpose, and are proud they can be good role models for their children.

The second course had 20 students, with 17 completing the course. Of those, 13 now have jobs. We are currently recruiting for the fourth course which begins on February 25th, 2019.

Kia Puāwai has achieved recruitment efficiency, cost savings, and improvement in recruits' performance.

- As a result of this approach, we need to do fewer assessment centres – which saves the time, effort and cost of contact centre team leaders and training staff attending many assessment centres.
- It also saves the time and cost of normal recruitment – because standard recruitment processes often engender hundreds of applications, temp staff are hired to assist recruitment at a cost of at least \$8000 per recruitment round. This expensive exercise is no longer needed with our new approach.
- Having two to three courses a year enables us to plan for intakes to provide CSRs at high-volume times of the year, such as rating periods.
- The graduates who are now working in the contact centre have generally higher quality of calls and lower unplanned leave than standard recruits.



This project heralds a new direction for recruitment not just for the contact centre, but also for other parts of council. It is an example of making our scale work, thinking laterally, working collaboratively and implementing innovatively.

Transformational leadership:

This initiative was fostered by the General Manager of Customer Services and is fully supported by the Chief Executive and executive leadership of Auckland Council. They have been willing to support the project by assigning significant resources and being willing to make the HR rules more flexible.

For instance, some of the Kia Puāwai candidates have police checks that would normally rule them out of employment. However, based on discussions with the candidates, clear evidence of commitment to change over some years, and careful observation throughout the 12-week study course, candidates are considered for employment.

This initiative is a good example of taking calculated risks to achieve a desired outcome.

Innovative development philosophy:

- *Supporting success for recruits:* A key success factor is the “promise” of a job at the end of the course. Our recruiting is planned in a way that coincides with each graduation so that all candidates who successfully complete the course are offered a permanent position with Council. This innovative approach ensures that candidates are not competing with each other for a small number of roles.
- *Set people up for achievement, not failure:* The way a normal assessment centre works is that you cull people based on low results in any test. However, if any of these students had an unexpected result and didn’t achieve well when all other previous tests in class showed their ability, we would offer them the chance to re-sit the test.
- *Hiring a group who has worked together builds connections:* the latest research in teams shows that if you hire a group who has worked together before, you get better retention and higher productivity.

Innovation, transformation and success:

- The recruits are acutely aware that this is a unique opportunity with great future potential, so they are keen to make it work. Having motivated and engaged contact centre staff results in happier customers and higher productivity
- The contact centre manager has said he wants most of his recruitment through Kia Puāwai, as he gets more motivated recruits with higher quality scores
- The success of this course has changed how WINZ is placing people, and how the Solomon Group is managing their courses - they began two other contact centre courses and are working more closely with other employers.
- Auckland Council is now in regular discussion with WINZ about making beneficiaries aware of other employment opportunities throughout the organisation.
- It aligns with the goals of the Southern Initiative, as more people in South Auckland are being trained and employed in quality jobs.
- Other departments in Auckland Council are looking at this initiative; some have taken on some of the Kia Puāwai recruits, and some are looking at ways they could do something similar.
- Following a presentation at ALGM in 2018, other councils have expressed interest in the Kia Puāwai initiative, to see how they could potentially implement something similar in their regions. It’s possible that merging contact centres may provide the scale needed for success.

- The reality and potential of this programme is powerful: if we take 25 recruits on every year for the next 20 years, that amounts to 500 people, many of whom are young Maori or Pasifika, and all of whom live in South Auckland. Most of the recruits are solo mothers, so we are directly affecting 500 families.
- The Kia Puāwai graduates have goals for the next few years and aim to be trainers, Quality assurance staff or team leaders. Kia Puāwai lives up to its meaning:

to cause to blossom, flourish, thrive.



On every level, this project is a win-win – for the course graduates, for Auckland Council, for the contact centre, for WINZ, for the Solomon Group and for South Auckland.