

National Conversation about Work

Manawatu-Wanganui Regional Report



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Introduction

The Wider Manawatu Region had a population of around 151,450 people in 2007 and incorporates Palmerston North, Manawatu, Wanganui, Horowhenua and Tararua.

Palmerston North is the main area of population growth and it is the home of the major retail and business service industries to the Wider Manawatu Region. The other districts in the region are mainly rural, with a focus on dairy, sheep and cattle farming. Agriculture-based industries drive the region's economy, mainly livestock farming (dairy followed by sheep) but also nurseries and fruit and vegetable growing. These are supported by food processing and associated manufacturing.

Industries in the Manawatu include agriculture, manufacturing and processing, health, distribution, tertiary education and scientific research and trades. In particular, the primary industries which are agriculture, and manufacturing and processing are significant contributors to the regional economy in terms of exports, GDP and employment.

Ethnically, the Manawatu is less diverse than New Zealand as a whole. A total of 73% of people in the Manawatu belong to the European ethnic group compared with 67.6% for New Zealand as a whole. People in the Manawatu identify as 73% European, 9% Māori, 1% Asian and 1% Pacific people.

The median age (half are younger, and half are older, than this age) is 36.7 years for people in the Manawatu-Wanganui region. For New Zealand as a whole, the median age is 35.9 years. Fourteen percent of people are aged 65 years and over, compared with 12.3% of the total New Zealand population.

The wider Manawatu region stretches from central east to west coast districts and constitutes a sizeable chunk of the central north island. This makes identifying regional communities of interest difficult.

Employment

The 2006 Census shows:

- Unemployment was 5.2% for people aged 15 years and over compared to 5.1% for all New Zealand.
- The most common occupational group is 'Managers' and 'Professionals'.
- The median income was \$21,600 compared with \$24,400 for all New Zealand.

Process of engagement

The Commission is targeting the following groups nationally: disabled people, organisations supporting the employment of people with disabilities and employers; Māori businesses; cleaners; women's groups with a focus on employment; young families; local government; migrant workers and sustainable businesses.

We also seek meetings with employers and/or employees in at least one key industry and include meetings with local groups who have expressed an interest in the project and where possible "new voices" – individuals and community groups who may not have participated in dialogue with the Human Rights Commission before. Engagement is reliant on access to individual employers, employees and groups who want to participate and the following summary regional report follows discussion with the 100 people we met and focuses on EEO patterns and trends.

Engagement with employers and employees for the National Conversation were structured around face-to-face meetings. The final, national report recommendations will also include information gathered from regional reports and on-line engagement.

This report summarises conversations held in the Manawatu in April and June 2009. The following groups and individual representatives were participants in the region.

Palmerston North

- EziBuy Limited
- Massey University

- New Zealand Council of Women (Manawatu)
- Vision Manawatu
- Palmerston North City Library
- Manawatu Knitting Mills

Dannevirke

- Paewai-Mullins Shearing Limited
- Maureen Reynolds, Mayor

Horowhenua

- Canvasland
- Levana Textiles

Feilding

- AFFCO Meatworks

Wanganui

- Wanganui Economic Development Agency
- Wanganui Chamber of Commerce
- GDM Group
- Mars Group
- Wanganui Security

Waiouru

- New Zealand Army (separate report)

Local Member of Parliament Chester Burrows met with us prior to our visit to Wanganui.

Conversations with groups of employees were structured around the following key questions;

1. What would make a difference for you to achieve equality at work?
2. How would this affect your family?

In some cases the questions were preceded by the DVD Making a Difference. These questions were followed by a general discussion about equality and fairness at work and what was needed to effect the desired change. Typically these discussions elicited a wealth of personal work experiences, stories both positive and negative, and highlighted a number of issues related to fairness at work.

Conversations with employers focused on key questions which included;

1. What are the pressing labour market issues you face?
2. What services/support would assist you?

We also asked about possible impacts of the global recession and recruitment issues given projected labour and skill shortages in the region.

Responses from employers and managers portrayed a variety of views and experiences.

Weathering the recession in Manawatu/Wanganui

Engagement in Manawatu/Wanganui occurred in April and June 2009. Regional March quarter employment data from the Department of Labour and the Ministry of Social Development showed decreased unemployment in the previous year compared to the year to March 2008 (now at 4.2% compared to the national average), an increased labour force participation rate of 65.8% which was lower than the national average and an increased employment rate which was also less than the national average.

Levin Mayor Brendan Duffy told us that the majority of businesses in Horowhenua were holding up well in the recession. He anticipates that as businesses make less of a profit in the near future they will become more conservative in their spending and will seek to contain costs. This will have knock on effects in the local economy. However, the reduction of household incomes will have a more significant impact on the wider community if companies “go bust or lay off staff”.

Maureen Reynolds, Mayor of Dannevirke, said that she believed the recession had not hit the region or Dannevirke by force. “It hasn’t really knocked on our door yet”.

Other regional commentators were less optimistic. While the manufacturing sector have forward orders for the next three months, there are other companies that have made people redundant and who are now sub-contracting out positions. We

were told “the bottom 10% in the business market are bleeding to death right now.”

Vision Manawatu staff we spoke to said that there had been 200 redundancies in the region in the week before our meeting in April. Almost half were students working part-time. They were seeing the emotional strain redundancies take on staff and organisations.

“Core business skills and management resilience is what is needed by businesses to weather the recession”.

Redundant employees were in effect “buying themselves a job” by attempting self employment as a response to being made redundant. There is “massive upskilling” needed by individuals to effectively do this and Vision Manawatu provides a start up allowance and guidance to assist.

Specific sectors in the region are also hard hit. As this report was being written Pacific Brands announced the closure of its Liberty brand underwear factory in Palmerston North with a loss of 50 jobs. Another Manawatu knitwear manufacturer said, “This game is tough.” His company employs 39 staff down from 50 two or three years ago and in his time in the industry he has seen 50% of knitting manufacturing competitors disappear. If the swine flu pandemic hit domestic tourism hard in New Zealand in 2009/10 this could have a significant impact on business. “The next six months are critical.”

There were mixed views about regional job summit activity. A major Wanganui employer said he didn’t think the summit had been as useful as it could have been. “There was a huge amount of horse power in the room but it just wasn’t used to best effect.” There needed to be more preparation and the summit would have benefited from being smaller with a better defined purpose.

A manufacturer said his company was \$1 million behind its annual budget in May and was now revising forecasts every two months. However, the company had anticipated the downturn and had adopted lean manufacturing as well as laying off staff at the end of 2008 as it anticipated tougher times ahead. It anticipated that greater efficiencies would lead to increased profitability despite huge pressure on margins.

The Wanganui Chamber of Commerce said a new milk treatment plant and a major fast food franchise were positive indicators while real estate, the car market and local media were suffering in the recession.

The Palmerston North City Librarian said staff had noticed that library clients had “shorter fuses” over quite small fines for overdue items and some were losing it completely at the service desk because of the stress they were under.

Some businesses were profiting from the recession. A Wanganui security company said organisations recognised the need for security to protect their assets in the recession and had enjoyed the biggest month of demand for domestic and residential alarms.

Redundancy

Businesses forced to cut staff find coping with redundancy stressful at a personal level.

“I recently had to lay off a guy who had been with us for 33 years. It was bloody difficult,” said a manager.

Another business owner in Wanganui said, “It’s hard on the people directly affected, of course, but it also means survival of the rest of the workforce. We collected some dead wood in the rosy period and we now have to do things in a different way.”

Other companies were using temporary labour to avoid redundancy situations.

What do people like about their work?

When employees, managers and business owners are asked what they like about their work, there is almost universal enthusiasm for its socialisation, genuine expressions of pride in products and services, appreciation of the variety of tasks undertaken in a

working day and strong explicit and implicit acknowledgement of the value of work in professional and personal satisfaction.

One local government employee said he liked “being able to see what you do reflected at home” in relation to some of the council’s community policies that affect the way people live.

“Being able to learn every day”, said another.

A female manager in a meat processing plant who had gone up through management from a technical background said she was attracted to the job because it was “never boring.” Despite being a woman in a non-traditional role she had not felt isolated because there were female vets and compliance personnel in the industry.

Even fighting to survive in business in recessionary times was described by an owner/manager as satisfying. “I enjoy fighting to defend an industry that I know and have faith in, even if I might be the last person standing.”

Pay is clearly a motivator.

A machinist said what had kept her at the organisation was “the fair pay compared to other places” while others said “sometimes we don’t realise how good it is here and we take our good conditions for granted.” In the past two years the organisation had “ramped up” skilled pay with a 13 % increase over two years. Despite the pay increases skilled machinists were in short supply.

At a Wanganui processing plant a variety of employees across different roles said the pay rates were good and job security was important when “jobs are dwindling out there.”

A local government employee said she felt undervalued. “Local government isn’t a great payer. I don’t think some staff are rewarded well and personally I would like more money.”

Issues

The following issues were raised by both employees and employers alike. They have been grouped by themes:

- Availability of labour and skills
- Ageing Workforce
- Pay Equity
- Attitudes to work
- Training
- Work Hours
- Flexibility and family friendly workplaces
- Disability discrimination
- Leadership
- Retirement and Volunteering
- Economic and business development

Availability of labour and skills

Job availability is critical for increasing numbers of potential applicants in the region. In Palmerston North the library advertised three customer services jobs and had 220 applicants. Two or three migrants a week from countries such as Colombia, Iraq and Iran who were working in jobs such as taxi-driving and cleaning and not using their skills or qualifications were cold calling at the library in search of employment.

Despite tightening availability and job losses across various industries in the region, skills shortages remain a constant issue for employers.

A Wanganui manufacturer advertising for 20 permanent skilled operators received about 100 applications. A total of 26 interviews were conducted and seven applicants were considered to be employable. Three of these pulled out of the process leaving four potential candidates.

“It’s not easy to get the skills we need. To be honest, given the timing of when we advertised and the falloff in jobs across the bottom of the North Island we were surprised that we couldn’t get the calibre we needed.”

A number of fitters and turners who had been laid off had applied for positions. While there had not been a direct fit in terms of the skills required these applicants were seeking security of employment.

“There were a number of younger applicants with skills issues because they had left school early and had undertaken no further higher education. The way some of these younger people present themselves in job interviews indicates that they lack confidence. The basics of job interview preparation could usefully be taught in schools.”

The same company had two trades apprentices in their third year but no apprentices in the processing roles. The two apprentices had set a high benchmark and the company had found that their high motivation and skills were not generally typical.

Another manufacturer in the area said in relation to developing local skills that apprenticeships were too difficult because “schools, by and large, don’t value manufacturing” and prioritised university educational pathways.

A Wanganui security firm said it had a “terrible time finding good staff” because of the high thresholds set by the company and its strict screening system”.

Skill shortages in the professional administration area (IT and accountancy) had led one company to relocate their head office to Auckland.

Ageing Workforce

Across industry sectors in the Manawatu/ Wanganui region the greying of the labour market is a significant issue that is openly discussed as a concern.

At a Feilding meat processing plant both management and the union listed the ageing workforce as one of their top human resource challenges.

The management perspective was: “We’re very aware of the issue and there is increased understanding that it is a problem but we’ve had less success in the industry in deciding what to do about it. It’s always going to be a physical job and what do you do when

someone is knackered? You can't force people out and older workers are often fearful about their futures because it is the only thing they've ever done.

“Also in the current climate there is a feeling among some workers of “why should I step down” when other work may be hard to secure. Often self recognition is a factor in an employee asking to be redeployed in a less physical job and the company attempted to accommodate such requests where possible.

The shed secretary said the real question for him was “how to let people step down and maintain dignity. Some of the older guys are struggling but they don't want to be seen as weak...It's a man thing.”

“Many of the older ones working here wouldn't know what to do with their lives if they didn't work. There's a very good culture among meat workers. How many people know 250 people like we all do working in the plant?”

In a number of other industries in Manawatu key staff are getting close to an age at which they might retire and younger people were not “in the pipeline” to replace them. For some industries such as engineering the physical demands of the job were becoming onerous or no longer of interest to the older workers holding those jobs. Managers in other industries such as the textile industry said that they had difficulty recruiting younger workers as they were not interested in the work. These industries predict that in a few years they will not have the skilled workforce they need.

“The average age in this company is between 45 and 55 years old, while this has no significant impact at the moment, in five years time my staff may have halved”, said a textile industry manager.

Some organisations are successfully addressing the ageing workforce issue by specifically targeting young people.

“If I was to go back 5 -8 years I would say the average age would be mid 40s now it's back to about the mid 30s with the biggest grouping in their early to late 20s. The way we've seen it, young attract young. When we got (the business) from Mum and Dad, we brought our mates and they all came, and now our children's friends have come along.”

The company has also done a lot to rebrand shearing as a young person's job.

“You don't need a gym, can make friends all over the world and do your OE, set yourself up to travel and work. We also got our training standardised with unit standards and ISO and have shearing recognised as a sport.”

“Some people say you don't have to go to school or learn anything about shearing. We say do you know this is a billion dollar industry, and we're not going to let just any idiot go crazy in here, we tell them that and say to them you've got your hand on it, don't wreck it”, the Manager said.

A Wanganui manufacturer who interviewed 26 applicants for 20 skilled processing operators said that two thirds of those were aged between 50 and 61 years. Some of them suffered from lower confidence because they were out of work and were “looking for a job, any job rather than our job.” Several applicants gave the impression they were “winding down before they retire.”

The Palmerston North City Council with 664 employees has 20 employees 65 years and over, the same number as those aged 23 years and under.

Another company is working with an education provider to ensure there is a “pipeline of fresh legs” for the company and the industry as a whole.

While concern was expressed about future skill shortages in industries with an ageing workforce, we continued to hear about age discrimination. At one workplace it was felt that there was a tendency to “get rid of the old folk” and people were encouraged to retire.

Pay equity

Different examples of pay equity were discussed with us. The first related to librarians, a traditionally under-valued occupation. The second related to parity for the same or similar work between permanent employees and temporary staff recruited and employed by workforce companies and supplied to organisations under contract. The third example involved the shearing industry.

Pay equity for librarians

A local authority in the region had created a separate pay scale for librarians which prevented comparison with similar groupings such as policy analysts. A total of 70 librarians were involved. This had effectively meant a drop in relativity and in some cases pay for the librarian had been frozen. As a result, a senior librarian with 24 staff reports earned the same as a third level Council employee. This was despite the post graduate training required to become a librarian.

“This is the same way nurses were treated for years”, said the city librarian. Librarians had a great commitment to their jobs, they were providers of services and had a love of systems. “They’re not interested in cash registers ringing in their ears but they deserve fair pay”. The vast majority were women in family situations looking after dependents and about 12 of the 70 were men. Librarians worked a six day roster and it was increasingly hard to get people to work on Sundays. The library workforce comprised about ten different nationalities and union membership was about 40%.

Temporary staff and equity issues

A Wanganui manufacturer with 220 staff which plans to automate some production in the future is using a temporary labour pool to help the company avoid redundancy. Two large labour market companies provide a pool of 60 to 70 workers from which about 45 might be used daily. However, there is a difference of nearly \$3 an hour between permanent staff and temporary staff hired by labour companies doing similar work.

“There are comments from some of the temps that the companies are ‘stealing money’ out of their pay because the rates reflect their employment by those companies who take a commission,” said a manager.

However, the company is trying to manage labour supply so it is not “designing redundancy” in the event of fluctuating production demand. If temps show promise in their role and they can prove themselves they can apply for permanent positions when they are available. The company acknowledges that permanent staff are more skilled and motivated and that temporary staff often have a mindset that it is “just a job.”

Pay equity in the shearing shed

Who does what in the shearing shed and what they get paid, illustrates some of the complex issues around pay equity. In the shearing shed “you get paid the same as everyone else doing the same job. A male cook gets the same as a female cook. Shearers get paid per sheep regardless of their gender.” This is pay equality. Pay equality law which made it illegal to pay women and men different rates for doing the same job was passed in 1972.

About 40-45% of the shearing gang are women are in roles as wool handlers, cooks and administration. There are currently no women shearers but there have been in the past. The last woman they had was from the UK. “She was a good shearer and could do 307 sheep in one day”(which is considered to be above average).

“The real money to be made in shearing is as a shearer and physically it is more suited to men. That’s where your high income comes from” The average shearer would take home \$50-\$60K per annum while the better ones can earn \$60 -100K or more. We were told “If you’re a woman, probably a wool handler at the top would struggle to get \$50K per annum and the average would only be \$25 -\$28K. That’s where the discrepancy comes in. Men will be earning triple what the women do.”

Attitudes to work

A senior manager talked of changing attitudes to work.

“I know it sounds like a huge generalisation but I’ve detected over the past 10 to 15 years a different attitude towards work, a greater self-centredness compared to the core values of service before self.” This manifested in greater taking of sick leave, some of it tied to family responsibilities and genuine illness and some of it to the taking of an entitlement.

Attitudes to work were linked by some employers to absenteeism. Absenteeism was the biggest problem identified by both management and the union at a meat processing plant. The union representative said young people in particular were Monday “no shows” and management said absenteeism was about 20% higher than it should be and was particularly noticeable on the Wednesday after pay day. It required constant management to ensure it did not impact unduly on production schedules.

Training

Tax incentives for diversity training were suggested by a Palmerston North human resource manager working in the private sector. A migrant to New Zealand himself, he said there was a desperate need for diversity training in the workplace that addresses some specific issues that newcomers to New Zealand need to understand to be effective in business and employment. In addition to the need for a grasp of the English language and an understanding of cultural norms, it is critical that newcomers understand 'how Kiwis think'. He believes that diversity training should include: boardroom thinking and culture, decision-making and problem solving.

He also said that "there is a need for training of all sorts within companies. The Government should be offering tax breaks to companies that invest in training and that training should include equal employment opportunities. To be eligible companies would have to demonstrate that they have conducted EEO training."

"In South Africa companies that register with accredited training providers and can demonstrate that they have conducted annual training get back 80% of the training dollars. In some cases this had incentivised training in companies by 100%. This should be legislated for in New Zealand."

This view is shared by the Small Business Advisory Group (SBAG) who recommended in their third report to government (2008).

"That employers be compensated (either tax credit or grant) for the costs of every employee they have in formal training".

SBAG Recommendation 6 2008

"That all business advisors and staff in government-funded and government-assisted economic agencies receive on-going training in sensitivity to cultural difference and in culturally appropriate behaviours, and that they use this training and closer relationships with the relevant communities to measurably improve Māori, Asian and Pacific business peoples' access to, and benefit from, business support programmes".

SBAG Recommendation 9 2008

At another meeting one participant expressed surprise that there was no legal compulsion around EEO for the private sector, which

suggests a need for better information and awareness about EEO issues in the sector. The Small Business Advisory Group also recommended:

“That information on good practice in employment relationships tailored to small business owners and managers, preferably endorsed by employer organisations, be made more readily available and be better promoted. This should include easier access to educational material and to support mechanisms (for example, free access to knowledgeable people who can provide practical and balanced advice to employers and employees on handling employment disputes”.

SBAG Recommendation 4 2008

A new training initiative for security personnel has been initiated by the co-owners of Wanganui Security. Literacy and numeracy is a problem in the industry and the new training course will involve distance learning and combine theory and practical scenarios including human resources, anger management, the law, and other aspects of the security industry. It is hoped that increasing professionalisation would allow trainees to upskill and enter other occupations such as the police, army and corrections officers as well as the security industry.

The company has in the past invested heavily in its own staff development. “We’re in the ‘bad news’ business and it’s important that we do develop staff and develop their strengths.” The company had just learnt that a long serving Māori staff member had won a national security personnel of the year award.

Work hours

Non-standard working hours was a feature of many of the workplaces we visited. Many workplaces have fluctuating production demands and this is managed in different ways by different companies. Uncertainty of income can be a consequence of fluctuating hours of work.

At the time of the conversations in Manawatu the idea of the nine-day fortnight as a way of saving jobs had been current for several months. In one company we visited a 4.5 day working week had been instigated to help reduce costs and to save jobs. The manager said that the decision was well received and though staff were not “over the moon about it, they saw the benefit of it”. The

impact on take home pay was approximately \$60-80 a week. Some staff have voluntarily taken a further half day so they are working a 4 day week. The reduced working week was introduced in April and it is anticipated that this reduction will continue until September. Traditionally orders increase for summer and it is anticipated that orders will pick up in warmer weather.

Variable hours of work depending on fluctuations in demand were a feature of one workplace. Despite this staff were not aware of any formal flexible work policies. People were able to do some swapping of shifts informally by using the notice board. One possible solution suggested by staff was for staff to move around different areas in the company in order to help out where they could, but “staff were not actively encouraged to work in a different area”.

Staff were able to pick up more hours during the weekend shift. We were told that there were always people looking for more work. It was also felt that inadequate notice of the following week’s roster was a problem for staff. In one work area three days notice was given, and in another, notice was sometimes given on the same day as the weeks roster started.

“It would be better to have a steady supply (of work hours) rather than ad hoc times dictated by the catalogue”, said a distribution worker.

It was felt that fluctuating demand in combination with the current economic climate both contributed to insecurity in the workplace. In another workplace part-time staff said they felt vulnerable to layoffs and were under valued.

“We rely on part timers” but “when an organisation is under financial pressure they often get rid of part time staff first”, an academic said.

One woman said that in areas where women work part-time, women were “not taken seriously and had to be more articulate and perform better than men”.

Another company has successfully introduced flexible working arrangements for staff, where previously the business had been “totally inflexible”. We were told that a staff member had come

back from maternity leave and indicated that she could only work from 7-10pm at night. Rather than lose a valued member of staff the company asked “How can we make this work for you? The staff member has now become the international co-ordinator. She has been set up with a laptop at home and sends emails at night. She has since increased her hours to 3-4 part-time days and 1 full time day.

“We have become totally flexible for the right person and it works for us. She works when our international markets are doing their work. It forced us to do things differently”, said a HR manager.

Staff from another workplace described flexibility of hours as one of the good things about working there.

In the primary agricultural industry seasonal work is a feature.

“In the peak season most of our workers are permanent part –time workers. In down times and in the off season they will have been lucky to have done 10 hours this week. When the work is there they have priority, but when there’s not we rotate them to keep everyone with some work”, said a manager.

The company we spoke to estimated that about 15% of their workforce are part of a global circuit who work in the northern hemisphere (for example Norway, the UK and the US) during our off season.

Flexibility and family friendly workplaces

Family friendly organisations receive the thumbs up from employees across occupational sectors. Some businesses have formal policies and others operate informally to allow employees time to organise their work and their family commitments. In most organisations employees are not using their legislative right to request flexible work. Some manufacturers arrange shift hours so it can accommodate after-school arrangements. However, where there are structural barriers to family friendly work, employees are unhappy.

For example, local authority evening meetings that required the presence of council employees late into the night was raised as an issue of concern by a group of city council employees.

One manager said, “We love our jobs and want to do a good job but my family is fed up. My family is at the stage of rolling their eyes at the prospect of another late night meeting.”

Another council employee said evening meetings posed an interesting dilemma. They did allow greater potential council representation from a wider and more diverse section of the community who needed to work during the day. However, participants at the meeting indicated that other local authorities had changed meeting times to accommodate more family friendly working conditions.

“No one can function properly after a 7 or 8 hour meeting. It sends a very bad message to an organisation if council leaders expect the staff to be sitting around the table after midnight. The next day staff have to cope with “tired, miserable and grumpy unit managers”. Late night meetings happened regularly every month.

Others in the same organisation were happy with their workplace flexibility and hours of work. One mother had arranged her work hours around school pick ups, another swapped Friday for a Sunday when necessary and another had flexibility for higher, tertiary study.

A Wanganui security firm with approximately 30 employees regarded their staff as an “amazing team” and had supported maternity leave provisions for staff including flexible, glide time after hours for someone wanting to ease back into the workforce after having a baby. The firm undertakes crime scene protection among its services. “Our people do some gut-wrenching jobs and we want to make the workplace as positive as possible so they can go home to their families in a good frame of mind” said one of the owners.

In a couple of workplaces we were told by staff and management that not only was the company family friendly but also operated like a family.

Managers from one company described the company culture like this:

“Employment and professions and careers have become very structured, almost sterile as opposed to what we’ve done here.

We've looked at what makes us special and different. And that is that our staff are family, and it's not just a word, it's real and that's the real challenge, you have to make it real.

There are a number of local families where our ties are intergenerational. The UK guys when they come in, any manuhiri that come here, the expectation is that we treat each other like family, you work to help us we work to help you, you look good we look good and vice versa.

There is a double edged sword taking people on as whanau but it works. One thing we found has worked is around whanaugatanga and manaakitanga and that is that people feel valued, and it doesn't matter who you are or where you are from. What matters is your contribution to the team."

Staff from one company said that what was good about the company was that they were fair, "if you have a problem they'll try and sort it out", and that management were "family oriented" and "caring".

"Company directors come and talk to staff and they know your name", said a staff member.

Disability Discrimination

Staff in one workplace discussed their experience of discrimination related to disability. One person said that Paul Curry's observation in our introductory DVD of "having to work harder and in most cases better than" (non-disabled people) really resonated for her. At Massey University, it was felt that provision for disabled students was helpful and that disabled students had a focal point to which they could go for assistance. However assistance for staff with disabilities was a different story, according to one participant.

A distinction was made between the assistance available to staff with disabilities which were visible and "sexy" (ie provided an appealing photo-opportunity) and those which were less obvious or hidden.

"If you're a large woman with a limp and callipers then you won't get looked at twice".

Leadership

One processing plant visited that is part of an international family-run business has five key goals which challenge all staff, called “associates” on an individual basis to take individual responsibility at work. The goals, in addition to responsibility are quality, mutuality, efficiency and freedom. The Wanganui company’s values that derive from the principles include open plan offices, a consistent uniform for all managers and staff and no preferential car parking.

This form of corporate leadership is welcomed by staff who are roughly equal by gender and have about 40% Māori, with strong Pacific Island representation.

“The good thing about working here is there is no hierarchy. Managers don’t make you feel inferior. You can walk up to anyone and let them know what the problem is and you are not looked down on,” said a shift worker. And another working in the same organisation said, “We all wear the same uniform. It’s not us and them”.

Another manager believed that innovative leadership will help keep businesses and industry viable in tough times.

Workers valued good communication between management and staff and managers also commented on how important communication is.

“I think there is a lot of goodwill towards (Chief Executive) going out and discussing the issue. There is more willingness at the centre to look at what is being disseminated to staff”, said one staff member.

“How do you really show people that you really care? Māori can do these things naturally without thinking about it. We have an opportunity to show a different level of leadership in business by incorporating some of those values that we think only belong on the Marae or with whanau”, a manager commented.

However, in discussion about communication between management and staff one worker felt that staff had not been adequately told of the state of the business which contributed to uncertainty, particularly during the current economic climate.

Another manager said that what made a difference for him at work is that as a “values-based person” he would not work in an organisation that wasn’t in step with his values. In the company he worked for he enjoyed the welcoming approach of the company, its community spirit, the robust induction and the integration of teams in the business.

The destructive effect of bad leadership was commented on by a senior local government manager commenting on the recent positive change at chief executive level.

“Positive leadership makes a huge difference to the way people see an organisation”.

A female manager in a non-traditional occupation said gender had not been a barrier to a leadership position. Her biggest leadership challenge to start with had been working in a unionised environment which had been an “intimidating experience”. She had “hardened up” and in the past three to four years union/management relationships were more positive.

“A culture of trust is very important. Transparency and good communication are valued. I walk around the plant every day and pretty much know all of the 250 plus staff by name. I undertake inductions myself, we have a weekly newsletter and I meet with supervisors every day.”

Retirement and Volunteering

Professional women in Palmerston North who had retired early to support partners in ill health spoke of the “tremendous culture shock” of being out of the paid workforce. They spoke of “loss of self esteem and the fact that what you do is bound up with who you are”. One woman asked: “Who am I when I don’t do what I once did?”

Another said, “My whole life changed. It was like an identity crisis. I’m now just a wife and I miss not having my professional contact. I don’t fit into many places any more because I’m a wife and a caregiver.

“We’ve had to carefully budget, too,” said a retired professional woman.

While one woman described those present at the meeting as the lucky generation in terms of retirement income from national superannuation, other participants said that women's interrupted career patterns meant that women often started retirement saving much later in life and had built up smaller asset bases than men when they retired. Women also bore the greater share of caring responsibilities in families whether it was caring for aged parents, family members when they were ill and children with special needs and this had an impact on the retirement plans.

"Women have to marry their work with other activities in a way that men don't", according to a professional woman.

This group of participants wanted more information about retirement planning and specific advice for professional women who retire early to support partners in poor health.

Voluntary work was seen by one group of participants in Palmerston North as critical to maintain social cohesion. A huge amount of unpaid work was undertaken by the group in a variety of ways: working in schools fundraising for community groups, monitoring research, marriage guidance and other activities. It was seen as beneficial to both the recipients of assistance and to volunteers.

"People receiving volunteer assistance are often amazed and overcome at what others do for them. Volunteering promotes good health and social exercise for those doing it," said one volunteer.

Volunteers we spoke to said that the emotional rewards gained outweighed any monetary recognition. "You don't look for monetary gain if you do voluntary work".

Economic and Business Development

The long standing traditional regional rivalry between Wanganui and Palmerston North has in the past inhibited some regional economic initiatives. However, a joint lean manufacturing cluster is being developed so that cluster experience from Wanganui can be shared in Palmerston North. A leader in this regional cooperation welcomes the value-added by New Zealand Trade and Enterprise funding around export-orientated initiatives.

Many regional economic development agencies, particularly those which are independently constituted, publish annual economic

development strategies that reflect labour market trends, analyse business expansion and contraction and present recommendations for future action.

The Wanganui District Council's Economic Development Unit is currently working with the Ministry of Social Development to develop an economic development strategy. Unit officers said it is difficult to obtain quality labour market figures for Wanganui because much of the data conflates Manawatu/Wanganui in terms of regional statistics. This makes it difficult to be accurate about how Wanganui is doing and for comparison with nearby Palmerston North, for example. The unit's officers suggested it would be useful if government departments disaggregated labour market data for districts with a population of 35,000 and over, for effective planning.

The linkage between research and development and job creation is clear in several of the industries visited. A new protein innovation research consortium which aims to make New Zealand globally recognised in innovative meat science for pet care involves AgResearch, Massey University and Mars Petcare New Zealand based at Wanganui. The new product launches associated with the research and development led this year to the company returning to four shifts. The cycle of new products leading to more business leading to higher product demand and therefore greater employment was taking place against the backdrop of the downturn.

Conclusions

The economic recession dominates the employment landscape in the Manawatu/Wanganui region as it does elsewhere in provincial and urban New Zealand. It is driving business to reduce labour costs through efficiencies and redundancies. The consequent loss of jobs, shorter periods of seasonal work in some industries and tighter order books impact on household income for many families. Several employers we spoke to, especially those in small and medium enterprises who are close to their staff, find redundancy as painful as those who are victims of lay-offs.

At the same time for some niche players and other businesses the recession has provided increased opportunities and requires new levels of business resilience.

Despite the recessionary pressures felt by employers and employees, workers are quick to identify and acknowledge good employers and quality leadership. They are equally forthright about the need to improve working conditions, inadequate communication between managers and staff and poor leadership where they perceive it exists.

Some employers are identifying what they regard as changing attitudes towards work expressed through lack of “work readiness”, perceived shortfalls in commitment, and absenteeism. This was expressed by one as a greater “self-centredness”.

Recommendations

- Government should incentivise EEO and diversity training in both the private and public sector by providing tax relief on training expenditure.
- Government agencies provide disaggregated labour market data for cities over 35,000 people to aid planning by local economic development agencies, chambers of commerce and other agencies.
- Local authorities who regularly hold lengthy night meetings are urged to review the demands placed on staff to ensure reasonable working hours.