

SECTOR STORIES: WHANGANUI



Jason Shalier (100% SWEET) & Heather Cox (Whanganui and Partners)

“Committed to making a difference for Whanganui Youth”

Q: Can you tell us a bit about your organisations and roles?

Jason: 100% SWEET is governed by Whanganui District Employment Training Trust. The name is a positive play on the term NEET (not in education, employment or training). Our goal is to get our school leavers into those education, employment and training pathways. I'm the manager, my role is to coordinate stakeholders and operations, to achieve great outcomes for youth.

Heather: Whanganui and Partners (W&P) is Whanganui's Economic Development agency (EDA). I'm the strategic lead for education and youth. I work with stakeholders to attract and retain young people, and grow opportunities in education to support that. Pathways from education to employment are important for all young people.

Q: How did your organisations first get involved together?

Heather: W&P want to see Whanganui thrive - to help achieve that our businesses need a supply of skilled staff coming through - particularly in aging industries. We spotted a gap in the matching school leavers with employment pathway, and so from that 100% SWEET was established. We support 100% SWEET as they help us meet our goals of a thriving economy!

Q: Jason, what challenges are young people facing that might stop them from getting into work?

Jason: There are a ton of social issues out there. In the education space, things can seem a bit like Netflix - you can scroll forever! When kids leave school there can be overwhelming choice, but not much support in terms of helping them narrow down options and matching them to the jobs out there. Building clear pathways for young people can and does make a huge difference.

Q: Your role then Jason is directly addressing that challenge - helping develop and nurture young people onto those pathways?

Jason: Yes, helping young people to identify their interests and guide them to the right pathway for them. Lack of visibility of pathways and guidance is what I see as the biggest issue.

Heather: Adding to that, I think Young people are focused on gaining credits at school. They aren't learning tangible, transferable skills in a project-based environment. Credits are helpful for academic pathways like university but not everyone wants or needs to go there. Meanwhile employers are looking for school leavers to employ. We need to promote the current and future pathways and close the skills gap.

Q: In the time you've both been in this sector, is there an achievement you are most proud of?

Jason: The biggest thing for me would be the 246 school leavers who have gone through 100% SWEET into employment or tertiary study since August 2016. Some of those might have found work or a pathway on their own, but a large amount would not have - and that's something that I'm really proud of.

Heather: For me it would be W&P being there to support and help grow 100% SWEET - providing strategic and operational support, and funding to get it this far. I'm incredibly proud to have been part of that journey.

Q: If you were to give some advice to businesses out there looking to hire young people, what would say to them?

Jason: I would talk to them about succession planning, and the need to invest in our youth. There are stacks of kids who are coming through who are perfect for a lot of the work out there, and those businesses with aging workforces need to get involved with young people early.

The comments that we hear about young people needing to be "work ready" or to pick up their game - to me it goes both ways. Businesses need to understand the youth that are coming towards them. They need to know how the modern teenager ticks a bit better. Those businesses that have done that, that have evolved, are reaping the rewards - especially from the skills and outlooks that young people bring.

Heather: Businesses need to be more proactive. They are obviously busy, but they need to take a more active role in engaging young people at school. Approaching schools, or working with Jason, and promoting their business as a pathway. That to me would be a far better approach than waiting for young people to turn up work ready on their doorstep.

Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us Jason and Heather.

If you have a sector story you would like to share contact:

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