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Getting the Most from Industry Training

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To reduce the risk of further leaky buildings, the building sector and Government have decided to go down the track of having licensed building practitioners carry out work in the building sector. This mandatory approach builds on the concept that work carried out by Certified or Master Tradesmen (tradespeople) must, by definition, be of high quality.

In comparison, those trained in the infrastructure sector have never been considered to have a "Trade" qualification, yet some analysis I saw some years ago suggested that the competencies and training required to build a piece of infrastructure can be as demanding as those needed to build a house or a commercial building.

It's interesting to note that these days both the building and infrastructure sectors rely on the same ITO (Industry Training Organisation) regime to develop and set competency standards and industry qualifications to the appropriate NZQA (New Zealand Qualifications Authority) level. Building and infrastructure qualifications to the same NZQA level must therefore be equivalent in skill and competency requirements. For the building sector the ITO is the BCITO and for the infrastructure sector it's InfraTrain. Considerable industry resources are consumed developing unit standards of competencies that get lumped together to form qualifications to NZQA qualification requirements and TEC (Tertiary Education Commission) funding requirements.

Despite this and over the years we continue to have some rework problems in the building and infrastructure sectors.

So why is this and how can we improve industry training?

Over the years I've heard a number of suggestions. The first suggestion is that the NZQA framework works well for knowledge based learning used in schools and universities but not as well for practical learning. This arises because people in the trades learn on the job as much as in the classroom. The constraints placed on qualification achievement from NZQA and TEC can work against this long term training route.

The other suggestion I've heard is that it's not enough to have trained people. They are only part of the solution. You must have *motivated* trained people with a company culture and company business goals to support them.

If these suggestions are correct, then it's possible for an employer to experience a lose/lose situation by incurring the direct and indirect costs of putting all his/her staff through qualification based training and in return getting no significant improvement in outcomes. This could occur if the qualifications were developed strictly accordingly to the NZQA and TEC requirements rather than the business model used by builders and contractors.

It could also occur if an employer who was putting his/her staff through qualification based training had such a poor company culture that training was never encouraged or brought to life on a day to day basis.

So what can be done about this? I believe two things

- Qualifications for vocational training need to be based on business needs and not just Government processes as above.
- Companies must value qualifications and make them part of a positive company culture.

Work is being done with InfraTrain to address these issues by looking to show the value of training and defining the customer business needs before training starts.

At the end of the day industry training is a public/private sector partnership with some of the cost being met by Government and the rest by Industry. The employee gains a qualification that he/she was generally unable to do in the school system. The company gains the benefit of training through reduced rework.

It seems pretty clear to me that both the Government and industry still have work to do to get the most out of industry training.

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