

More skills in 2018

Kirk Hope

Approaching the end of 2017, this is the time for making decisions for the new year.

For business, it's time to consider what's needed to get better productivity and growth in 2018.

Based on what I hear from enterprises all over New Zealand, I know there's a big need for the right skills to allow business to prosper.

Employers need to fill jobs in construction, trades, engineering, IT, technical occupations, farm management and more.

These are occupations offering good prospects for pay and advancement. A young person preparing for a career would benefit from considering them.

These occupations also require certain levels of educational attainment. For most, good results are needed in secondary or tertiary level maths and science - particularly maths.

The difficulty of filling jobs in these areas reflects the lack of maths and science graduates in years past, and shows the importance of these subjects for the future.

It sends a message to young people preparing for a career: your choice of subject matters.

Choosing to study maths and science in 2018 should be seriously considered.

This is not just a message to young students - people of any age can benefit from choosing to gain skills or get upskilled in priority areas.

Improving and adding to your skills is the most useful way to prepare for growing, developing or changing your job – and this is the time of year for enrolling in 2018 learning opportunities.

The right skills benefit people and business.

What business needs is a pipeline of skills – an ongoing flow of people coming out of education and training with skills that are relevant to productive business.

Employers don't have much control over the pipeline

Decisions about courses offered and courses taken are made by training institutions and by students themselves, with little ability for business input.

But there are options for businesses to consider in terms of gaining skills - for both the short and longer term.

For current needs, it is still possible to import skills from overseas.

While the criteria for gaining an overseas worker are being progressively tightened, the Government has signalled that in genuine areas of need where suitably skilled New Zealanders are not available, work visas will still be allowed.

For the medium term, there are also strategies available for gaining needed skills.

Employers could consider offering apprenticeships in relevant areas.

Or they could consider developing in-house training focused on their main proprietary skills needed.

Perhaps they could consider a bond system for employees receiving training investment.

For the longer term, employers could consider dialogue with their local polytech or training provider to help shape the kinds of skills being provided.

Direct engagement between business and education providers holds a lot of promise for aligning skill needs and skills delivered.

Businesses could also speak up more about what they need. A local firm facing skills shortages shouldn't hesitate to say so, loudly. Young people in the area need to hear about the sorts of jobs they could aspire to with the right skills.

Almost by definition, a young person tends not to know much about the realities of business and what business needs, so it's up to those of us in business to communicate harder the absolute importance of relevant skills.

A highly-skilled workforce is critical for a growing economy and a high standard of living, and we need to pull every lever we can in order to get it.

For 2018 and beyond, New Zealand's continuing growth and development depends on decisions made about skills right now.

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