

Improving diversity in the construction sector

Case study:
National Timber & Hardware Association

SVA Social Ventures Australia

NTHA
NATIONAL TIMBER &
HARDWARE ASSOCIATION



Executive summary

Facing pressing challenges like a skills shortage, high cancellation rates, lack of diversity, and an ageing workforce, National Timber & Hardware Association Trainees & Apprentices (NTHA) piloted a new approach to recruiting young people that improved **employee satisfaction and retention, and drove a 31% increase in diversity.**

NTHA recognised that removing barriers to participation in apprenticeships or traineeships was crucial. They joined SVA's first Employer Innovation Lab and, with SVA's support, ran a pilot program that established a more inclusive recruitment process, and improved employee supports. They also improved their data collection and internal communications, and organised external events to challenge biases around recruiting diverse young people.

Economic headwinds during the pilot triggered a downsizing across the construction sector that impacted the timber and hardware trades. This led to a reduction in NTHA's workforce, and made it harder to convince their partners to rethink negative perceptions of young people experiencing disadvantage.

Despite this, the pilot successfully increased overall diversity in NTHA's workforce by 31% and brought lasting changes to their recruitment and retention strategies. The team will build on these practices and continue gathering evidence, to drive better business outcomes and promote change across the timber and hardware sectors.



About NTHA

Formerly known as TABMA, NTHA represent over 700 members across Australia from the timber, hardware, and building materials industries.

NTHA Trainees & Apprentices are the Group Training Organisation division of NTHA, providing apprentices and trainees to the sector, and employment for young people. They ensure that each employee receives high-quality training by matching them with a suitable 'host' employer to work alongside, developing the skills that they need to achieve their qualification.

NTHA's policies have the potential to pave the way for member organisations to transform recruitment and retention strategies at worksites nation-wide.

Key challenges

High cancellation rates

When young people started an apprenticeship or traineeship, too many were cancelling early.

Ageing workforce

NTHA's members were facing a looming skills shortage and no clear path to tackle the problem.

Lack of diversity

Traditional biases around 'who could do the job' left NTHA with a homogenous workforce.

Recruitment barriers

Recruitment processes, like marketing materials and stressful interviews, were deterring promising applicants.

Declining wages

Young people weren't being attracted by training wages that sat below minimum wage.

Low awareness of benefits

Employer partners weren't seeking diverse hires, and didn't understand how NTHA could help recruit and retain staff.

Pilot overview

NTHA recognised that to address their challenges, they needed to improve their practices and increase diversity of their young employees.

They were interested in making workplaces better for all young people rather than setting targets for specific cohorts. Everyone, from First Nations and long-term unemployed, to gender-diverse and culturally and linguistically diverse people, was welcome.

During the pilot, NTHA:

- Revamped marketing materials and HR processes to be more accessible and inclusive;
- facilitated pre-interview, on-site meetings with young people and hosts to calm their nerves;
- shifted from rigid interviews towards informative conversations with an emphasis on coaching;
- improved data collection to better understand their workforce, and added new tools to measure employee experiences; and
- improved the support processes in place to assist young people towards their career goals.

They also ran a workshop at an industry conference to encourage behaviour change among hosts, and used other channels to communicate the value of hiring young, diverse workers into apprenticeships and traineeships.



Impact of the pilot

With economic challenges across the construction sector impacting the timber, hardware, and building materials industries, and cost of living pressures biting young people, NTHA's pilot faced an uphill battle.

Yet, despite a reduction in their total workforce, they not only saw an uptick in retention, but managed to increase diversity of their workforce by 31%*.

They also now have more robust recruitment processes, better data collection tools in place, and have commenced a CRM migration to improve tracking and support for apprentices and trainees.

* Diversity here is measured by the proportion of apprentices who are women, Indigenous, Culturally and Linguistically diverse, and/or people with disabilities.



Lessons learned

NTHA's pilot experience highlighted the importance of gaining internal support from senior leadership. It also underlined the challenge in driving cultural change at host worksites, where NTHA have limited control. They also identified a need to provide ongoing support for employees facing barriers.

In the next 12 months, NTHA aims to support around 160 young people, with a strong emphasis on diversity. They plan to expand the pilot, and are developing a library of resources for their field officers.

In the longer term, they hope to promote greater diversity in the sector and continue encouraging employers to hire young people facing barriers to work. They will achieve this by collaborating with workforce agencies and community groups, hosting events on diversity and attitudes towards employing young people, and strategic communication with their members.



About the Employer Innovation Lab

The Employer Innovation Lab is an initiative by Social Ventures Australia empowering organisations to address workforce challenges by breaking down barriers to employment for young people experiencing disadvantage.

[Learn more on the SVA website.](#)

