

Preparing staff for automation

Case Study: Ports of Auckland

Come mid-2020, Ports of Auckland will be the first port in New Zealand to automate its container terminal and the first port in world to introduce hybrid automation.

In layman's terms, that means 27 robotic straddles will complete the less complex work of loading and unloading trucks and operating the container yard, while humans will perform the more complex work of getting containers between the yard and from ships to shore.

For the port, the case for automation is compelling. Robotic straddles mean they will be able to stack containers four high instead of three, almost doubling their capacity without needing to reclaim more land. It also future-proofs the port to keep up with growing demand over the next 30-40 years.

But ask the port about what the future of work means for them and they'll tell you – it's about people. "It's an exciting time ahead but people, people, people, we have to look after our people," says the port's Chief Executive Tony Gibson.

Opening minds to change

Getting staff onboard with automation has been a long process according to the port's

General Manager People, Foresight and Innovation, Diane Edwards.

Once the business case for automation stacked up, there was a year of formal consultation with staff and unions.

But less formal staff engagement has been a critical part of getting staff onboard. To aid with this, they converted two shipping containers to take their staff on a journey through time from 1985 until 2035 to show them first-hand what everyday life was like. This included what was on the television, what people were wearing and, of course, what was happening at the port. The time-warp was an opportunity to address fears by showing them how much change has happened in their lifetimes which they've adapted to without realising it and how automation was an evolution of that.



Diane says for many staff, it was also the first time they'd ever actively thought about their futures.

The port was expecting staff retention would be an issue throughout the change process but found the opposite was true.

“We were expecting that we would have a lot of people leaving the port because they might be nervous about what change might mean. In fact, we haven't found that at all. Our turnover is pretty much what it's always been.” Diane

Edwards, Ports of Auckland

The port has also undertaken Future Foresight training with more than 80 staff, defining what the business needs to look like in 30 years' time and what steps they need to take to get there.

Talking to staff about automation

Communications was key for the port to bring staff with them on their automation journey.

The port seconded staff into a change team and made sure managers were prepped to talk to their staff regularly throughout the process.

They also split their staff into three distinct groups in recognising that not all staff were affected by automation in the same way.

The first group were those directly impacted by automation who may not have a job at the end of it. The comms to this group focused on reassuring staff that the port would support them through the change.

The second group were those whose jobs were safe but changing considerably. Comms

to this group focused on the new opportunities they have to reinvent the port and how it does business.

The third group were not directly impacted but still needed to be onboard, with comms focussing on their role in being part of an innovative world class company.

The robots are (not) coming for your jobs

Initially automation was expected to result in up to 60 less jobs at the port, with the reduction managed via normal attrition.

Automation has also resulted in new jobs and tasks being created, such as production managers and the addition of a new tele-operator roles in stevedoring. Autonomous straddles will also need servicing, so mechanical engineers are learning systems engineering skills, and some are learning mechatronics.

“I'm optimistic as we can never seem to find enough staff. So robotics will fill gaps and do less reliable jobs and while people upskill and do more interesting, challenging work,” says Tony.



Retraining and upskilling

The port has encouraged those affected by automation to undertake familiarisation tours



of other departments to assess interest in jobs like IT and engineering.

But they're also willing to help staff who decide to leave the port or those that have no other prospects at the port. For instance, to date they've retrained eight straddle drivers to become truck drivers, a logical move given New Zealand's shortage of truck drivers. They've also put aside money to support those whose job will become redundant and are unable to move into other roles at the port. For others it will be about funding to retrain into a trade and the port is talking to trades training and tertiary providers to assist with this.

"We have a social responsibility to retrain people either in new jobs on the port or outside the port." Tony Gibson, Chief Executive, Ports of Auckland

"There will be less need for people to drive around in circles picking up boxes, which is what a straddle driver does. So ideally a straddle driver needs to be retained to do more fulfilling work. There will be new and different roles at the port but these will be higher skilled roles like IT and engineering and people will need to be retrained to make the transition," he says.

Career and emotional support

The port recognises that staff require more holistic support to prepare them for the

future of work and to help foster a mindset of lifelong learning. To help with this, they offer courses on skills like communications and leadership, as well as help with CV writing. They have also provided access to free and confidential counselling sessions through the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and given managers mental health training to help them lead and support their staff through the change process.

Tips for others

For the port, going where no one else has gone before and not knowing what they didn't know was their biggest challenge.

Looking back, Diane says planning is key for others looking to automate. "With a programme like this it isn't just about the technology. Sit down and look holistically about what automation will involve because the technology is just one slice of a much bigger pie and how it impacts people is a much bigger piece than most projects give it credit for.

"So, for us it hasn't just been about comms and training, it's been looking at how job descriptions change, how does the bonus system work, what do we do with people who are in an age bracket where retraining is not a realistic option. There's a whole range of things that need to be thought of in the people space."

About Ports of Auckland

Ports of Auckland is New Zealand's largest port. It is owned by Auckland Council but operates independently.

About the Sustainable Business Council

SBC is a membership organisation, with a long-term aim to make sustainability mainstream within New Zealand businesses. They do this by inspiring businesses by creating a community of positive change, supporting members to go further and celebrating their leadership and success. SBC is part of the BusinessNZ family and is the New Zealand Global Network partner to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

