



# Looking beyond immigration



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**I**mmigration is such a polarising debate in the world right now. While it is not as intense in New Zealand as it is in places such as the United States or Europe, it is certainly playing a major part in this year's election campaign.

The road transport industry has come to rely on immigrant workers to address short-term workforce shortages, although the removal of truck driving from the Immediate Skills Shortage list has made obtaining work visas for overseas drivers so much more difficult in recent years.

And there isn't much light at the end of the tunnel. Parties on all sides of New Zealand politics seem intent on making further restrictions to the number of work visas available. Labour has joined with New Zealand First in advocating a much more restrictive immigration policy while the Greens are also uncharacteristically dabbling in this space.

In April, and in response to the growing political pressure, National has tightened the rules pertaining to permanent immigration, including the introduction of two new remuneration thresholds for applicants applying for residence under the Skilled Migrant Category.

One threshold is set at the median income of \$48,859 a year for jobs that are currently considered skilled. The other threshold, which is for jobs not considered skilled but are well paid, is set at \$73,299 a year or 1.5 times the median income. It is this second category that directly impacts our industry, as somewhat frustratingly,

truck driving is not considered a skilled profession. Tell that to the drivers navigating their 50-tonne vehicles over the Rimutaka Hill.

The industry, through the Road Transport Forum and its associations, continues to mount a strong case for truck driving's re-inclusion on the essential skills' list. However, the current political climate is not encouraging. Perhaps we will have better luck after the election.

So, where should our industry focus its efforts in the meantime?

Firstly, it is vital that we value and look after our skilled and professional drivers. Reasonable working hours and decent remuneration rates go a long way.

Secondly, training and recruitment are extremely important. It is an obvious thing to say but upskilling people in our

businesses and having them perform well benefits the business, it benefits them and, perhaps most importantly, benefits the industry as a whole. There is a perception that there is little value in training staff who are likely to leave and go elsewhere. However, if transport companies truly value the people behind the wheel who are after all responsible for their big expensive assets, then it is far more likely that they will stay.

Millennials (those born between 1982 and 1996) are typically more inclined to look for an employer who can offer an employment package that includes ongoing learning and career advancement. They're looking at conditions and opportunities to grow in the business and achieve some formal skills to add to their CV. It is accepted that young people in engineering, mechanics, and construction do apprenticeships but we don't seem to be so open-minded and supportive of that model for our young drivers. Maybe that is an area we should look at more closely.

There is no easy silver bullet solution to our workforce problems. Yes, immigration has a part to play but in the foreseeable future, it is an extremely unreliable option. An enduring solution is most likely to come from a mix of recruitment, retention, provision of work-life balance, and training. A good place to start is by considering what works best for your company in the context of the local employment market and focus on building your reputation as an attractive local employer. ■

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