

Celebrating business - General Cable

Global, high-tech and safe

General Cable NZ Ltd is a key part of a vaulting high-tech multinational company, yet has its feet firmly on the ground taking care of employees in Riccarton, Christchurch.

The Canterbury company makes energy and communications cables that are installed throughout New Zealand, Australia, South-East Asia the Pacific and even Antarctica. Alongside sister headquarters in the US and Europe, it's the Oceania headquarters of global firm General Cable. The multinational is a world leader in cable design and manufacture – products involved in rapid technological change.

General Cable NZ started operations in 1946 as Associated British Cables Ltd, a manufacturer of low voltage electrical cable. The subsequent ownership change and steady increase in technological capability has seen it provide cable products for some of New Zealand's most notable construction projects – the national backbone of fibre optic cables and CBD networks, power plants, large retail complexes, the Bluff aluminium smelter, Parliament and Te Papa.

The variety of work undertaken is huge – the company manufactures more than 7,000 different items – and has led to an innovative approach, for example a control system to integrate the process of plastic coating into the main cable production line. The system, developed by General Cable NZ's own staff, cost a fraction of imported systems, and boasts a touch-screen control device so simple that anyone in the company can use it.

General Cable Chief Executive Campbell Whyte says this 'number 8 wire can-do' approach accounts for the company's success in competing in world markets. Recent work for clients in Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Pakistan, Kuwait, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia have seen offshore orders providing around 45% of total revenue.

Though the company's reach is international, its focus on staff is very local. Along with other human resources initiatives, it boasts one of the most well-grounded and effective safety programmes in the country.

Campbell Whyte says the company's SafetyFirst programme was a response to the risks involved in manufacturing operations.

"We made good progress in the 1990's in reducing accidents and injuries but then struggled to make further improvements - despite an extensive safety management programme, ACC tertiary level accreditation and significant investments in safety equipment and plant modifications we had not eliminated the risk of harm to our people. People were still getting hurt at work – we feared it was only a matter of time before a serious injury occurred.

"We did a complete review of our accident history to understand what was happening and discovered that while nearly all our accidents had multiple causes,

human behaviour was a major factor in most. We needed to create an environment where people placed more value on their own safety and that of their workmates.

“It came down to values.

“So we got together a team of management and employee representatives to address our underlying safety culture. What came out of it was a programme that helps people change the way they think about safety at work and that helps them take responsibility for their actions.”

Campbell Whyte says General Cable promotes safety ‘behaviours’. Some are straightforward - like looking out for hazards and wearing protective gear. Others are less obvious but just as important – like requiring every employee to challenge any task they consider unsafe.

“Not everyone feels comfortable speaking up, but it’s an essential behaviour for us to achieve an accident-free workplace,” he says.

By drawing on the involvement of all staff, the safety system is self-sustaining, not requiring outside consultants or a lot of managerial intervention. Though it’s early days, General Cable has reduced lost time from injury by 50% since the launch of SafetyFirst.

General Cable has also instituted innovative programmes in other areas, for example the Target Zero waste reduction project, for which it received a Christchurch City Council award for business resource efficiency. All five factories on the Riccarton site were exhaustively examined for data on energy and water consumption, steam and heat loss, and solid and liquid waste disposal. The exercise identified many opportunities for improvement and has led to the cost of waste disposal being halved.

“Of course the savings are a benefit and have aided our competitiveness but, just as important, they’ve engendered a really positive feeling among our staff. Having a workplace that’s safe for employees and for the environment gives a great sense of satisfaction,” says Campbell Whyte.