

New Zealand optometry practice owners can now access the Ministry of Social Development's (MSD's) Mana in Mahi (Strength in Work) programme, boosting both wage subsidy and course fee contributions for aspiring dispensing opticians.

The Mana in Mahi programme offers employers 12 months of funding towards training and sustainable employment of new permanent staff. It includes a wage subsidy of up to NZ\$16,000 (Flexi-wage \$276 per week for 24 weeks) and \$8,000 towards course fees (Flexi-wage \$5,000), while trainees are offered up to \$3,000 in incentive payments during the first year. If a practice already has a candidate in mind, it can refer them to MSD for enrolment onto its books, before it refers them back to the practice to employ.

Leesa Stuart at Rolleston Eye Optometrist is the first practice to have used the Mana in Mahi programme. "Reading in NZ Optics about the lack of response from the industry to MSD was a catalyst for me to give it a try. It just worked brilliantly."

The process itself was very straightforward, said Stuart, adding she had already identified a candidate on MSD's books who was looking for work. With the programme's support, the candidate was hired and is now enrolled on the Australasian College of Optical Dispensing's (ACOD) Cert IV course. "Mana in Mahi is a big commitment for both parties, but it removes some of the stress and pressure, ensuring that we're both heading in the same direction. I think they've named the programme quite well, as it's very supportive."

Stuart said she also likes the flexibility of having the two schemes available to practices. "I could have used the Flexi-wage scheme, but in the end the Mana in Mahi programme gave me what I really wanted: getting assistance to get someone qualified in a year's time. To me, that's really significant."

Vineet Chauhan, former president of the Association of Dispensing Opticians New Zealand (ADONZ) and the driving force behind the scheme, said MSD is making an exception for the industry to access this funding. Although the programme is designed for New Zealand Qualifications Authority courses, MSD has agreed to make funding available, mainly because the ACOD Cert IV course is the only pathway for DOs to get qualified, he said. To take part, a practice needs to have a permanent, full- or part-time position to fill, be willing to offer at least the adult minimum wage and commit to supporting the new employee to achieve completion of a relevant and approved industry training pathway. Mana in Mahi candidates need to be either a New Zealand citizen or resident, available for full- or part-time work and keen to train towards an ACOD Cert IV qualification.

For more information about Mana in Mahi, see www.workandincome.govt.nz/employers/subsidies-training-and-other-help/mana-in-mahi.html

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