

# Christchurch internship scheme helps aspiring directors

An innovative scheme is aiming to diversity the skill set in companies, reports Amanda Cropp.



Stacy Squires

Jonathan Lyttle.

Elizabeth Kirby is an example of the new talent emerging from an internship scheme run by Christchurch City Holdings Ltd (CCHL), parent company for the Christchurch City Council's commercial interests.

She doesn't fit the traditional mould for an aspiring company director. "I'm not a lawyer and my number capabilities could do with some improvement because I'm not an accountant."

But as a Microsoft NZ Small and Medium Enterprises business manager Kirby's knowledge of cyber security and other technology issues is something many boards are increasingly looking for as they diversify their membership.



David Walker

Christchurch City Holdings board member Bill Dwyer (middle) with some of the first of aspiring company directors to complete the internship programme, Jonathan Lyttle (left) and Elizabeth Kirby (right).

The CCHL programme is part of the push to get fresh new faces with a wider range of skills into the country's board rooms.

#### READ MORE:

\* [Directors want more cash to compensate for higher workload](#)

\* [Women's numbers on NZX boards fall short](#)

Kirby and her seven fellow interns from the first intake - two men and five women - are coming to the end of their tenure and will help select the next intake after applications close next month.

She describes her stint on the board of Christchurch International Airport as a cross between a "mini MBA and on-the-job training," and witnessing the inner workings of a board confirmed her ambition of eventually becoming a professional director.

With 170 applicants last time, intern scheme sponsor and CCHL director Bill Dwyer expects strong competition for places.

[Ad Feedback](#)

He mentored two of the current interns. They were treated like other directors, encouraged to participate in boardroom discussions, and received a grant to cover the costs of an Institute of Directors course of their choice.

Although some board chairs and directors were initially hesitant about how the internships might work, Dwyer said, "every single company without exception all commented on what a brilliant experience it has been."

He was keen to see more companies take on intern directors and said they didn't necessarily need to be large organisations, provided they had a recognised governance structure and formal board meetings.

"Companies that sit down and think about how they're performing. What's their business plan? What's their strategy? You could put an intern into a company with two or three directors, it's all about gaining experience."

Dwyer hopes the next group of applicants for internships is as diverse as the last. "They weren't all private school Pakeha. Some of them you read their CVs and boy they've worked hard to get where they are.

"I think people are realising that diversity around the board room table is quite important. There's a lot of talent out there that may not come to you through the usual channels."

Gender continues to be an issue. A 2015 survey by the New Zealand Institute of Directors showed women made up 22.4 per cent of the directors in the 1326 organisations surveyed, and it also found that 60 per cent of boards agreed diversity was a key consideration in making appointments.

Janice Fredric, chair of the Canterbury branch of the Institute of Directors, sat on the Connetics board in 2013 as an observer and is a big fan of the CCHL internship scheme.

While female representation on boards was important, she said the need for diversity had been widened to include the age, ethnicity and background of prospective directors, as well as their financial skills.

"Typically in the past there have been a lot of lawyers and accountants, but there's a great need for IT and marketing skills, and more Maori and Pasifika. In most boards 'young' means 35 to 45, but it depends on your market and who you need to connect with."

### **Aspiring director - Jonathan Lyttle**

Sitting on the decision-making side of a boardroom table was an eyeopener for CCHL director intern Jonathan Lyttle.

The managing director of Christchurch commercial real estate company Savills said he learned a lot from watching directors marshal their arguments at meetings.

"It's very hard to get directorship experience and cross over into governance.

"Normally I'm sitting on the other side of the table making the reports. Having come from management it's very easy to want to retain control over all aspects of a working business because you're the one at the coalface making the immediate decisions. Taking a higher level view from a governance perspective has taught me to be more critical in my thinking and look longer term."

Lyttle appreciated mentoring sessions with directors like Dwyer because they helped put complicated decisions into context. "It took a good six months of attending board meetings before I really got comfortable with everything that was going on."

The experience left him with a greater respect for the job that directors do to improve the value of a company and mitigate risk.

"It's easy for people not in governance positions to look at a board of directors and say it's an old boys' club, or it's a matter of relationships or right that they have ended up there, rather than skills. What I took out of it was how much good directors bring to the table, and how important they are for business at any level."

The 36-year-old said it was important for succession planning to have younger people represented on boards, and their perspective was valuable.

"In 2005 Facebook didn't exist, 10 years later it is one of the largest companies in the world and the same could be said of Twitter. They may not be media that everyone chooses to enjoy but their commercial weight is phenomenal. There's a whole generation that has been raised with this technology and a different way of thinking. We're now looking at crowd-funding and there are new ways of doing business invented on a daily basis . . . Young people have great ideas, look at Sam Morgan, he's an example of that."

**- Stuff**