

Think employment in forestry, and you may focus on a man chain-sawing trees.

But Julie Walkinshaw, Manufacturing Manager at the Dongwha Patinna (NZ) Ltd panel production plant at Matura has put her hand up to say that the sector offers a lot more than tree trimming for career development, and for women.

Ms Walkinshaw features in a Southern Wood Council DVD “The Faces of Forestry,” produced to promote career opportunities within the forestry and wood products industries, and is an enthusiastic advocate for her industry. “In fact, the forests have been part of the region for so long I wonder if we sometimes see them for the opportunities they actually are.”

The born-and-bred Southlander knows; she’s made the most of the experiences that have come her way in the wood processing sector, in an environment she loves. “The thing I like about what the sector as a whole has to offer is the possibilities - the forestry industry isn’t just about cutting down trees.”

“There is diversity of jobs, and there’s plenty of opportunities to gain qualifications and grow jobs, whether you’re working in the forests or in the wood processing plants. There are multiple chances to learn, it’s up to you if you want to take it up, and there’s support for making study and work happen. You can take yourself as far as you want to go – anything from an apprenticeship, diploma, bachelor in forestry science, a national certificate in silviculture, or an accounting degree or an MBA.”

“I think the sector has also worked hard to make the work/life balance happen for its employees. And the money’s good – we’re in the top quartile of Southland industries,” she added.

The Matura plant operates 24/7, making Medium Density Fibre board (MDF) produced from chipped logs from the region’s forests, for use in the building industry and furniture trade.

The 31-year-old’s role at the plant started with looking at quality systems for audit certification. She’s since been involved in operations planning, linking the production side with marketing, looking at what products are running and where to minimise downtime. Those roles gave her a grounding in plant management, and she progressed to process engineer responsible for MDF “recipes,” then did shift work as a production team manager and managed a team of MDF technicians, ensuring they met production targets in their day-to-day production of the panel board.

Now she’s in charge of the four production team managers, responsible for half of the 100 staff employed at the plant, ensuring the panels are made to specification while managing health and safety and environment issues and that the mill is run to optimum efficiency.

A strong maths and science background took her to Lincoln University for a biochemistry degree. Although having a degree has been beneficial, had she had more information on the choices available, Ms Walkinshaw may have done her study slightly differently to fit the career path. “I took part in the production of the DVD because I wanted to make sure younger people know what’s on offer, and to make sure they have good information available to them, so they can make informed choices on subjects to choose in school and beyond, and to plan their work path.” And of course to say the industry’s a great place to work.”