



SCHOOL NOT THE ONLY ROUTE TO SUCCESS: James Tohill wishes he'd stayed on at school but, despite leaving early, he now has a solid work history, is highly experienced and has carved out a successful career with Spencer Henshaw Ltd.

Ditching school opens door to successful career

James Tohill readily admits school wasn't his thing. At 15, he pulled the plug and left.

But not before Rosmini College's then-principal had taken him aside and asked his disillusioned student what he wanted to do with his life.

"I just said I like working with my hands," says the practically-minded father-of-three.

As luck would have it, his headmaster was acquainted with Terry Henshaw; owner of one half of what would later become Spencer Henshaw Ltd (SHL).

The result was an entry point into the building and maintenance trade for Auckland-based James.

"I started on the broom, helping out the guys who knew what they were doing and just being the 'bum boy' really! Then I moved on to the small things and went from there."

Thirteen years on, and still aged just 28, James now has more than a decade's experience on and off the tools and is a valued employee at Spencer Henshaw Ltd.

"They took me back more than once in the early years after a couple of hiccups, and I'll forever be grateful for that," says James. "I've been here since I was 16 and there's a real family culture - it's a good number I've got!"

These days the keen rugby league follower works as a Responsive Scope Co-ordinator for SHL, head maintenance contractor for four Housing New Zealand regions.

"I scope the jobs and then see them right through to completion," explains James, who estimates he spends around 60 per cent of his time on the road.

"So I'm out meeting with contractors, managing any issues and variations, overseeing compliance and health and safety and, towards the end of the jobs, checking for quality."

And while many shy away from challenging work, it's the complex stuff that James thrives on.

"I love the upgrade work we do on Community Group Housing," he says by way of example. "You've got 12 to 15 contractors, strict timeframes to avoid disrupting the residents...your phone just doesn't stop, and I love that."

James' skills are sought elsewhere around the business too.

"I'm always being nominated for extra stuff! I'm on the Health and Safety Committee for my team and I'm involved in trialling a new Health and Safety app at the moment," he says. "Much as I hate all the meetings, I do enjoy being the guy everyone wants at these things!"

While the keen fisherman admits he would see school through to the end if he had his time again, his advice to young people considering an apprenticeship is simple.

"I'd say go for it, 100 per cent. Yes I left school early, but I've got to where I am now. I have mates who stayed at school, went to university and got degrees, but it hasn't got them far at all. Once you've got your trade qualification, you've got it for life."

Spencer Henshaw Ltd is Housing New Zealand's head maintenance contractor for Housing New Zealand's Northland, North/West Auckland, Central Auckland and South Auckland 2 regions.