

Success Stories

From Auckland to Tonga: A Graduate Engineer's Journey

David Greis, a second-year graduate engineer at McConnell Dowell, has had a unique journey—from internships and local projects to an unexpected international placement in Tonga. His story is one of stepping up, saying yes to challenges, and finding growth in the most surprising places.

Q: David, tell us a little about your journey so far with McConnell Dowell.

I started as a graduate back in February 2024 after completing two previous internships with Jacobs and Ground Investigation Ltd. I came from more consultancy-type work but found I preferred being out on site, talking with the crew, and just being out in the sun. It felt a lot more fulfilling seeing the physical results of my work. My first appointment was the Warkworth to Snells project—I was there for about eight months learning the basics of Engineering and Operations like ITPs, CEPS, and health and safety procedures.

Q: And then came Tonga—how did that happen?

It was very unexpected. I had just wrapped up Warkworth to Snells, went to the beach with some colleagues after work, and when I got back to the car, I had a missed call from Sara Paris, our Human Resources General Manager. I called her back and found out they needed someone in Tonga. That was on a Wednesday. I got the confirmation Thursday, and I flew out Monday morning. It was a rush!

Q: What was it like transitioning to a project overseas?

It was tough at first. The setup on site was quite different to what I was used to, and I had to adapt quickly. That meant taking on a lot more responsibility—everything from health and safety to CEPS, ITPs, some site management, and even stakeholder communication. I got to work with the New Zealand Ambassador to Tonga and provide updates to our leadership team. It was a huge learning curve, and very overwhelming, but overall an incredibly valuable experience. I definitely couldn't have done it without the help of Chris, Jason, Tevita, as well as everyone on site.



Q: How did that compare to your work back in Auckland?

In Auckland, everything's a lot more structured—the systems are in place, and there's a clear hierarchy. Grads tend to focus on quality assurance, procurement, and material tracking. It's a great way to ease into the industry. In Tonga, though, you have to wear a lot more hats. I was

doing pre-starts, planning, ordering materials, dealing with clients and stakeholders, writing most documentation, managing health and safety, variation negotiations, and some project pricing. It was overwhelming at first, but I had great support from the head office and the local crew, and over time, I became much more confident.

Q: What's something you've enjoyed outside of work during your time in Tonga?

Sundays were the best—we'd go out to the islands, swim, snorkel, explore shipwrecks. The expat community is so close-knit. Everyone's away from home, so you meet amazing people with such different stories and backgrounds. It's been a really fun and rewarding experience overall.



Q: You're now in your second year of the graduate program—what's next for you?

I definitely want to continue growing from similar experiences as an engineer. One thing I really like about McConnell Dowell is the complexity of the work. It's not just roading—so far I've had experience in tunnelling, heavy civils, and who knows what's next! I'm currently working out of the Queen Salote Wharf office on another project, with exposure to marine works, and I can already see how much more technical it gets. I'd love to keep moving in that direction, learning more with the help of everyone on site.

Q: What advice would you give to new graduates just starting out?

Take the opportunities—even the scary ones. When I got the call about Tonga, I was nervous. A big part of me didn't want to leave what I knew. But I said yes, and it turned out to be an amazing experience. Saying yes to things outside your comfort zone is what really helps you grow—

15/04/2025

professionally and personally. I would also encourage grads to lean on their team and try to grasp as much knowledge as possible from the guys on the ground. Chris, Jason, and the local crew were fountains of knowledge, and will carry everything I've learnt from them in my career.

