

A Mentoring Case Story: Focused Quality rather than Quantity

November 2009

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The Mentee

Ben Lim

From: Philippines

Sector: IT

Current Role: ICT Operations & Client Services Manager

Employed by: North Tec

With a total of sixteen years experience in IT, Ben started out as a systems analyst/programmer, then went into systems administration, technology implementation project management, and finally data centre and technical support management for two outsourcing companies.

Ben arrived with his wife and two children in New Zealand in April. They chose to come here because they felt it offered them a better future, having seen how friends who have been living here since 1995 have prospered.

Ben heard about OMEGA and its programmes through the Auckland Regional Migrant Services (ARMS), and decided to sign up. He was paired with Scott at the end of June, by which time he had sent out over ninety CVs.

The Mentor

Scott Lord

From: New Zealand

Sector: IT

Current Role: Group IS Manager

Employed by: Zintel Communications

Originally from Christchurch, educated at Massey University, and for the last nine years working in Auckland, Scott had a taste of being a skilled immigrant when he did his four years of OE in London. He has spent his entire career in IT: first with a large UK systems integrator, and then either in consulting or IT management.

Scott is passionate about leadership within the IT sector, and saw the OMEGA mentoring as a chance to give something back to the wider IT community: "My wife and I are passionate Kiwis, and we know people who have had negative New Zealand experiences for one reason or the other, and it [the mentoring] sounded like the chance to do something positive. The last thing we want is people coming here and feeling aggrieved or land up being lied to about New Zealand, because we're a great country, we've got a lot to offer, we're just a unique breed in our own selves."

The Match

Over a meet and greet coffee, the first impression that Scott had of Ben, was of a well-dressed and motivated IT professional. And once they started talking about his career history, it was clear that he had great work experience. But Ben felt that in spite of this he needed Scott's mentorship: "Basically my problem was I wasn't getting any interviews. I realised I must have been doing something wrong, so I needed someone to help me to get my CV right, considering the economic situation, the availability of jobs, and the difficulty of getting work." Beyond this, Ben also was looking to tap into IT sector networks, and thought that a mentor would probably have access to these. He was also unsure if his conversational

English could be understood due to his accent: "Since arriving I had been associating with Filipino friends and we were speaking our language, so I did not have much interaction or prolonged conversation with English-speaking people. The experience of talking to Scott gave me confidence that I could communicate clearly."

The next time they met, Scott opted to pull in the HR expertise of a colleague, Jacqui Schubert. Together they were able to offer Ben guidance on his work search.

In its initial form, Ben's CV seemed to be selling his employers rather than Ben. The trio were able to

go through it and highlight what it was that Ben had done to add value to the work, particularly from a management perspective. They also agreed that a shorter CV, which focused on work experience of the last five years was probably more readable for an employer. Ben comments on this CV editing: "Initially, I included my sixteen years of experience on the CV and all companies that I worked for which was wrong. Jacqui and Scott advised me to read and pick up what the job advertisement required, and include only the experience and employment history specific to this. They also said that I should state the details as concisely as possible, so that at first glance the CV would not be an eye-ful to read. Same with the cover letter. Details must be concise and specific to the job. Putting the strengths in the first part of the CV would also help in selling my capabilities on the first read."

At the same meeting with Scott and Jacqui, Ben was able to discuss a viable and improved interview approach, in anticipation of future success. He had already had one interview, but had not landed the job. Scott and Jacqui suggested that Ben research the company and people who would be doing the interview, and also prepare in advance for several generic questions likely to be asked. To this end, Scott was able to leave Ben a copy of an interview checklist, so that Ben could review the questions. He recalls: "Previously

when I didn't have that, I was working on trying to get those behavioral questions and there are a lot on the internet, and it is hard to remember all the answers for them and basically it [the interview checklist] narrowed it down to the questions that I needed to work with and it really helped me."

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Scott

Ben says he was surprised by Scott and Jacqui's further suggestion that he also have questions ready to ask the interviewers. In his experience of interviews, this was not something normally done. Lastly they also suggested that should questions come up about mistakes in the workplace that he may have made in previous jobs, that he be upfront about these, and also describe how he had learnt from them.

The Critical Difference: Focused Quality rather than Quantity

Ben maintains that the most salient guidance he got from the mentoring, was to focus his job search and applications on quality rather than quantity, and to aim for what he really wanted, and what was appropriate to his skills and level of expertise. He tells how he arrived here with a work permit and a set amount of savings to last his family several months. Knowing that there was pressure on him to put food on the table, meant that he applied for any IT job he could possibly do. He comments: "The burden of knowing that basically you're an immigrant during recession time, and with no New Zealand work experience puts you into a panic mode. When I entered the mentoring programme, Scott and I agreed on a strategy ... I successfully resisted all types of pressure to apply for just any IT job, and stayed with the strategy that Scott and I agreed on."

The pair talked about applications Ben had sent out, and did a brainstorm on the type of

organisations that would be best to target, and how to go about doing this. Scott's sense was that Ben was quite possibly aiming too broadly by going for any IT job. He was aware that New Zealand IT sector employers would probably look at Ben's CV and say, "this applicant is over qualified for the job and will probably either expect to move up in the organisation, or move on as soon as the economic situation recovers". The interview that Ben had attended was for a team leader of a call centre, yet Scott's sense of Ben's CV, was that he did not come across as a team leader of a call centre. Scott had no doubt Ben could do it; but that he was well and truly over qualified for it.

Ben was encouraged to think about what it was that he *really* wanted, and to aim for an appropriate level job i.e. IT management. He comments: "When I arrived here I brought with me management experience, yet applied for lower level IT positions. I took advice from friends who

said I should apply for any IT job I have the experience to do, just to get the New Zealand work experience, because it will be hard to get a management position without local work experience. The advice from the mentor was totally different. He encouraged me to focus on applying for jobs appropriate to my skills and level. Although a lack of New Zealand work experience can be a factor, there is still the fact that I have sixteen years of experience in IT; I just needed to sell this to my new employers.”

So the challenge for Ben in the face of his dwindling household savings, was to go for the best IT job, rather than any IT job. Practically, this meant doing less CVs and applications per day – at the most two – but really researching the organisations he was applying to, and writing the best cover letter. “So what I did was to concentrate on the quality of the CV rather than the quantity. At first, I was trying to do as many applications as I could in a day. At the end, the quality of the CVs and cover letters suffered and they tended to become generic. Also, positions that I was applying for, as Scott said, were not the ones I should have been applying for. Changing this strategy resolved the issue. I started concentrating on applying for appropriate positions; tried to

understand the needs of the company based on the job advertisement; provided concise details on how my skills would qualify for the position; and lastly provided brief descriptions on how I could help their organisation.”

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Ben

The Breakthrough

On the Friday Ben met with Scott and Jacqui, and by the Monday morning he had a revised generic CV and reworked cover letter on hand. That week, he submitted several well-researched CVs for appropriate positions, and the following week received a phone call from North Tec in Whangarei inviting him to come for an interview.

Using the guidelines from the mentoring, Ben was able to prepare with confidence. He says that possibly the interviewers were impressed with him because he knew quite a lot about the organisation and director, having done a comprehensive web search. He was also well prepared for the tricky questions, in particular one which wanted to know that given his IT experience with much larger organisations in the Philippines, how he felt about working for North Tec, a smaller organisation by comparison. “So I explained to them that I do understand that I come from a bigger organisation, but basically it is more of how to do the job. It is not the size of the organisation that counts, but implementing the process changes and making things work, and this is what I enjoy most. And

whether it’s for a big organisation or small, when I see that through my efforts IT works for them, I am happy staying with that company.”

Driving back to Auckland after the interview, Ben got a call asking him to come back the next day. Scott says: “He sent me an email saying ‘I’ve had this interview and they want me to come back tomorrow’, and I said ‘Well done! They’re keen, and for you to go all the way back to Whangarei the next day, they must be interested’. So we met for a coffee where we talked around the contract and the negotiation and what should Ben ask for and what shouldn’t he ask for and those sort of things.” Several days after the second interview, Ben heard that he had been awarded the role.

As ICT Operations and Client Service Manager, Ben manages the daily operations of the IT Infrastructure and Core Application Systems which includes network (LAN and WAN), communications (integrated PABX and IP Telephony), 500 desktops, and 60 servers (both application and database). He is also responsible for infrastructure upgrades, but his current focus is on stabilising operations,

managing, and recruiting and training staff. There are eight people who report directly to him, supporting over 450 staff and more than 3000

Looking Back

Ben reflects on the process of looking for work here, and juxtaposes this with the same process in the Philippines. He says that in the Philippines the CV format is much longer and covers qualifications and all experience. He says the aim is to show that you have done a lot of different things and that you are flexible: "That's a very big difference from what is here. They want it simple, concentrating on the specific skills that they need."

Then he says that the New Zealand market is a smaller by comparison to the Philippines, and that the university you study at counts a lot. "In the Philippines large organisations recruit graduates from well-known and reputable schools [universities], unlike here in New Zealand where wherever you graduated from you are on an equal footing. In the Philippines you don't have that luxury. Even if you have experience, you still carry that background. So it is important which university you go to because they will profile you accordingly."

students. Scott comments: "It's a great first job to have, especially in a tight economic time."

He goes on to say he really appreciated the advice that Scott and Jacqui gave him, and that it was structured. He says the input kept him motivated and his confidence up: "Having somebody to talk to who knows how to do it correctly gives you the assurance that yes I'll get a job, just follow what's being advised... Scott's time and mentorship was a very big help for me, and my family and I are very grateful."

Scott says that mentoring Ben is no different to how a workplace leader would mentor their own staff, or would work in a normal role. Being a mentor is no big departure from an ordinary business day or professional role.

He says the best thanks from Ben that he and Jacqui could have, is by Ben just becoming a Kiwi, and continuing to do what he is doing at North Tec. He says of Ben: "He did it all basically, we did nothing. We just pointed him in the right direction."

Ben and Scott's Tips for Skilled Immigrants:

- Don't lose hope; keep yourself encouraged.
- With all the change it is easy to become disorientated, and to lose focus. So concentrate on applying for the job you really think you should be applying for, and that is pertinent to your main skills. Focus on what it is that you want to do and don't lose sight of it, especially when you need the money. Because once you are a taxi driver and you're trying to find a CA's role, you'll just be seen as a taxi driver.
- Consider the market, where it is at, and what kind of jobs are appropriate to apply for in the current economic climate.
- Especially within the IT industry, focus on what it is that you do. Don't go lower than that or undersell yourself, because you could get stuck in that position, and it could take many years to work yourself back to where you should be.
- Also within IT, if you are working with a recruitment agency, don't let them seize on one thing in your CV, and only put you forward for that type of role. Make sure they understand the kind of role you are looking for.
- For every ten thousand dollars you are looking for, it might take a month to get that job. So if you are looking for a 60 thousand dollar job, it might take you six months to find that, because it takes time for people to leave the job that you are wanting so that you can go into it.

Note: People quoted speak for themselves and not on behalf of their employer. The views expressed are not those of OMEGA unless specifically stated.