

A Mentoring Case Story: Help for the Long Haul

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The Mentee

Jonathan 'Woody' Ramirez

From: The Philippines
Sector: Manufacture
Current Role: Document Controller
Company: Fisher & Paykel

What drew Woody to relocate his life from the Philippines to New Zealand was simply the promise of a better life.

"Initially my close friend who is here was talking about New Zealand. And in the Philippines there are a lot of adverts about New Zealand; that it is a nice place to live and that there is work and life balance. So when I came here I found that it is actually a nice place, and working here is more laid back than in the Philippines. I had not visited before, but I read a lot of newspapers and the internet."

Since Woody had worked for fifteen years in government service, he thought that he would head for Wellington. But a lack of support structures in that city found him arriving in Auckland in July 2009, boarding with his friend and starting his work search in this region.

Woody had left his family in the Philippines: the plan was that he would go ahead, find a job, a home and a good support structure, and then they would follow.

The Match

Programme staff at OMEGA saw that both Woody and Iqbal had experience in IT and in government service listed on their CVs, so the match was an obvious one.

What I got from the OMEGA programme was of course polishing my CV writing skills..., but it was much, much more than that.

Woody

The Mentor

Iqbal Mohammed

From: Fiji & New Zealand
Sector: Government
Current Role: Project manager: organisational planning
Company: Auckland City Council

In his challenging role at Auckland City Council, Iqbal works across several different groups to help align the council's planning – both annual planning and beyond, and ensure that once the programme of work is drafted, staff are aware of what they need to do.

A committed philanthropist, Iqbal saw the opportunity of working with a skilled immigrant as responding to two important areas of his life: Firstly in his role as an employee at Auckland City Council, Iqbal wanted to help someone towards a quicker settlement (The council, being a community and service focused organisation, had made a call for staff to get involved with the OMEGA Mentoring Programme). Secondly, Iqbal is part of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community which helps people from all over the city, so the mentoring also aligned well with this.

And obvious on paper turned out to be natural in reality: the pair maintain that from day one of meeting they struck a chord and decided that they would drop anything that might come between them and their goal of getting Woody into the right job. Their approach was to have an open and honest relationship.

"We talked to each other not like a mentor and a mentee but more like two people working together with a common goal," comments Iqbal.

At the end of July, they started meeting weekly and also sent numerous emails – the easiest way to keep in touch when Woody needed a bit of advice or wanted to tell Iqbal that he had landed an interview.

Woody was looking for guidance in terms of his CV writing and interview skills. It is not that his confidence was lacking in this regard, it was more that he had gathered so much solid experience in different fields over the years, he was unsure how best to represent this on his CV, *and* he needed it to align with the New Zealand job market. He had also attended a couple of CV writing workshops, but these had suggested conflicting approaches for compiling a CV for the local job market. Woody says that he had become uncertain as to how best to proceed.

Iqbal's one-on-one advice proved invaluable, and together they were able to simplify the CV and work it into a style that would be interesting and eye-catching to the reader. They also put together a plan to help them focus on the task at hand, as well as a spreadsheet so that Woody could easily keep track of the many – over 100 – jobs he had applied for; to know when someone phoned, who was calling and about which job.

Even though the mentoring went on for several months, the pair did not complete the OMEGA Mentoring Programme as per the programme handbook.

Iqbal comments, "I wanted to tailor it [the mentoring] to what suited Woody in this specific instance, to what would work for him and for me. And the purpose we both had was to get him into a job as soon as possible; ... and not just any job but one that was aligned to his need for residency."

The most enjoyable part of the mentoring partnership was meeting someone new and being able to make a difference to their life in New Zealand. And in that making a contribution to the country.

Iqbal

Arriving on a work to residence visa, Woody needed to get work within a specific range of jobs to be able to apply for his New Zealand permanent residency and therefore remain in the country.

The Critical Difference: Support over a long period

But when the mentoring got going, little did the pair think that it would take Woody – with all his skills and experience – eight months to find that right job. Woody comments:

"When I was still in the Philippines I got a phone interview from Wellington. But when I got here it was an entirely different scenario – I did not have any interviews for four or five months so I was really getting worried."

The tough mid-recession economic climate of 2009 was in full swing; companies were simply not hiring. Iqbal maintains that the job market is now beginning to 'soften', but it was very hard when Woody first arrived in the country, and is honest about how the mentoring went:

"I think it is fair to say, that I actually miscalculated my assistance capability [as a mentor]. I thought we would be able to get Woody into a job within three months, even though I knew that the job

market was tough. At the time, the feedback I was getting from my networks, was that you could not do anything in the job market. And I think it is still a bit like that, for example, with the changes coming up with the new Auckland Council, getting a job with the existing councils as a full time employee is more difficult. So this was against Woody, as he arrived on a visa that needed him to get a job that was relevant to the basis on which the visa was granted ... it's been a tough road. It took us longer than we thought – eight months."

This lack of breakthrough over so many months was the most difficult part of the resettlement for Woody. Without his family, and with diminishing resources there were times – especially over the December holiday period – that he thought he should pack it all in and return to the Philippines. But knowing that Iqbal had warned him that between November and January the employment industry would be very low, and also the thought that his family would never get to experience New

Zealand, kept him in two minds to actually make the move back to the Philippines.

It was over this long demoralising wait for work that Iqbal's role as a mentor came into its own for Woody.

"What I got from the OMEGA programme was of course polishing my CV writing skills and everything, but it was much, much more than that."

Woody feels that without a doubt, the main thing which Iqbal helped him with was remaining encouraged, and being determined to get what they had set their minds to.

Iqbal felt personally responsible for Woody's success in landing the right job; that as a *team* they would win or lose together, and comments candidly:

"One thing that was extremely hard in our relationship was the emotional drain it had on me. When I say emotional drain what I mean is there were times that I felt extremely bad because I couldn't do much more than what I was doing so it was very frustrating for me – something that Woody didn't know. I wanted to say to someone "Just hire this guy now!" And what scared me was there were times when Woody was thinking that this thing was not working out, his visa time was coming to an end and his family was back home, so it was extremely hard. So I take my hat off to

Woody for hanging in there. That was my fear; there were times I thought he will go back home."

Woody says the seemingly small thing that kept him going whenever he became discouraged, such as if he was rejected from an interview, was that Iqbal would always end his emails saying 'I know that something good will happen for you'.

Iqbal maintains it was a case of doing a bit of positive talking to hang in there. He advised Woody that they both should give it a final shot in early 2010 before they give up, and as it turned out, it was this extra time that made the critical difference and Woody found the right work:

The real battle here in New Zealand is whether you're going stay or go; it's maybe 70% an emotional battle because when you get rejections everyday, or you send out twenty CVs and you get nothing back, then you'll be thinking maybe I should go home.

Woody

"I always had faith in Woody, he has brilliant skills and I thought from day one, I have faith that he will get a job, it's just a question of the time to get the *right* one."

The Breakthrough

Woody had largely been applying for business analyst roles, and had landed some interviews with big companies such as Hewlett Packard, but with no success. Then it was over the difficult December period that the seeds for Woody's new job were planted.

During the holiday down-time, he took on a temporary part-time assembler job in the manufacturing plant of Fisher & Paykel. It was while doing this that he heard of an opening for a document controller, which was similar in many respects to business analyst work, as it involves knowing about practices and document management systems. So he went ahead and applied.

Woody was one of 78 applicants for the role, and was then shortlisted along with six others, and then down to an interview shortlist of three. He successfully landed the job and started working full-time in February.

Subsequently, he has found out that the manager of the document control team had observed him during the interview, and realised that along with his experience, Woody has the kind of character, values and personality that would fit well with the rest of the team – an essential criteria for any team leader. Further, Woody maintains that just having that bit of New Zealand experience – albeit on a production line – also made a difference. He already had his foot in the door. And just in time too, as his visa was due to expire in April.

Looking Back

Reflecting on the mentoring relationship, Woody emphasises that what he received from Iqbal went far beyond the practicalities, and was more about the moral support, and this is what all mentees need.

"Because the real battle here in New Zealand is whether you're going stay or go; it's maybe 70% an emotional battle because when you get rejections everyday, or you send out twenty CVs and you get nothing back, then you'll be thinking maybe I should go home. If mentors always support and say things like something good will happen to you, it keeps you going."

Iqbal agrees that there is a lot of satisfaction to be gained by giving that support.

"The most enjoyable part of the mentoring partnership was meeting someone new and being able to make a difference to their life in New Zealand. And in that making a contribution to the country."

On a professional level, he says that there is excellent experience to be gained for a mentor by keeping a finger on the pulse of what's happening in the job market and in trying to assess what's going on – it keeps you on your toes. But he does believe it is important for mentors to step out of a strictly formal mentoring role to give moral support when required.

Considering that Woody was here without family and with only one friend, the pair believe it was very valuable for him to have a *professional* contact who was giving him that much needed vote of confidence.

"There is an impartiality, which is important. If I was a friend of Woody's then it [the encouragement] doesn't have the same affect. But when the mentee has a professional person supporting them, then they feel obliged to be committed to this thing," Iqbal points out.

He sees OMEGA as playing an important facilitatory role of bringing people together, and thereby helping newcomers to settle into the country.

"If programmes like OMEGA were not there, I think a lot more immigrants would be driving taxis or jumping on the next plane going home. So the

support being provided is absolutely outstanding, even if it is a drop in the ocean."

Iqbal calls it the 'the starfish principle': there might be thousands lying on the beach in danger of dying; but for every single one thrown back into the water of the job market, it makes a huge difference.

Woody believes that to make it here, you have to be very determined, and this is his principle advice for other skilled immigrants thinking of coming to live in New Zealand.

You have to have the determination to make it here; you have to be strong... Getting a visa is just the start. Getting a visa in the Philippines is not landing a job in New Zealand.

Woody

"You have to have the determination to make it here; you have to be strong. Because you might not be with your family, and you are in a place that is very different from home and so you have to have that strength (and of course money!)."

He also advises people not to bring their family initially, because the reality of what they might find when they get here is very different from experiences in a home country.

"A lot of people in the Philippines who are still at the interview stage for the immigration process are very positive about New Zealand and the reality here is different. You get a high when you get awarded a visa – and I felt like that – , but when you get here and you don't have a job and you're running out of money and missing your family, it's very different. Getting a visa is just the start. Getting a visa in the Philippines is not landing a job in New Zealand."

Iqbal says immigrants should prepare themselves for things turning out differently.

"One of things you need to be prepared for when you get here, is that things won't necessarily work out to your timeline or expectations. You will have to adjust and compromise, and get your foot in the door to then start building your future. It won't be a big bang and on day one you get it all."

He says the most important thing is to have self-belief, because it is likely that things will take a long time to settle down, and you going to have to keep going over the long haul.

Woody and Iqbal's Tips for Skilled Immigrants:

- Be very determined and focused.
- Fight it out and land a good job; don't give up early
- Prepare yourself for things to take longer than planned; or even to not work out as planned at all, but to go in a different direction.
- Leave the family at home initially (if possible), get here and make headway in settling in before bringing every one to New Zealand.
- Believe in yourself and be positive: you have skills, experience and abilities that the New Zealand job market needs.
- Understand that getting the paperwork with the Department of Immigration and getting appropriate work in the New Zealand job market are two different things; getting one does not mean the other is a given.
- Mentors are there to help you find a job, NOT find a job for you.
- Be honest and open about the progress.
- Engage with your mentor effectively.
- Don't feel shy to ask for help.
- Seek help early and prepare yourself well for all situations.

Iqbal & Woody's Tips for Mentors:

- Step out of the formal mentoring role to give moral support when required because that is a huge and important part of the what the mentee needs.
- Remember what you are doing: 'dabbling' in someone else's life, and possibly their family's as well. So go carefully and respectfully.
- Keep giving the mentee encouraging messages – these all make a difference to them.
- Be prepared to be in it with the mentee for the long haul, if needed.
- See yourself as part of a team with the mentee, with the common goal of finding the right job.
- Be brave and face the realities of the job market and its related issues to prepare your mentee well.
- Prepare the mentee for success on all levels.

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