

A Mentoring Case Story: Energy in the Interview Room

September 2009

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The Mentee

Nevril Rebello

From: United Kingdom & India
Sector: Scientific & Research
Current Role: Production Documentation Specialist
Company: Douglas Pharmaceuticals

Initially on holiday when he arrived in New Zealand in November 2008, Nevril started searching for work in March 2009. By the time he started meeting with Steve, he had applied for about ten jobs, of which five were rejected for lack of New Zealand experience. For the others, Nevril was short listed for interviews, but the feedback he received was again his lack of local experience.

Nevril studied a Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology in India, then went to the UK to do a Masters in Applied Biosciences from Nottingham Trent University. After this he worked near London at Unilever as a research scientist.

There are two main reasons Nevril cites for coming to live in New Zealand. Firstly, it is the type of country he would like to settle in over the long term, and he believes it has a lot more to offer by way of a relaxed lifestyle than London. Secondly, when he applied to the Department of Immigration, he was welcomed as a permanent resident, being told that people with his qualifications and experience are needed in New Zealand, as they help to improve the country's OECD ratings. The second was his real deciding factor: the 'promise' of a good job.

The Match

Steve and Nevril spent in total about eight hours together, which comprised three face to face meetings, and a number of emails and text messages. They say they took an active and precise approach, and quickly got to know each other, understanding histories, culture and the like.

The Mentor

Steve Moss

From: New Zealand
Sector: Scientific & Engineering
Current Role: Business Improvement Facilitator
Company: Tonkin & Taylor

Born in Tokoroa, studied in Mount Maunganui and Auckland where he now lives, Steve is a Kiwi who has seen how we are becoming a more diverse nation. Being a committed quality practitioner, he believes that donating a percentage of his time to help quality in general within the workforce is a way to play his philanthropic part and give back to society. He is aware that what is stated overseas about finding work in New Zealand is often not what skilled immigrants find when they get here, and his desire is to help bridge this gap.

In his role at Tonkin & Taylor Steve does the internal health and safety compliance, the general quality assurance compliance, and then also consults to the company's clients in these areas. When consulting to Auckland City Council (an OMEGA partner), he became aware of an email endorsed by the Council, letting employees know about the OMEGA Mentoring Programme. He immediately became interested, especially since the Auckland City Council's CEO, David Rankin was taking the lead in the programme's roll out. To date, Steve has been involved in three mentoring matches through the Mentoring Programme.

When Nevril signed up for the mentoring, he was primarily looking for assistance with the motivational aspects of his job search. With good qualifications and experience to back this up, he was looking for support from within the industry; a vote of confidence. Steve maintains that because Nevril was prepared, he could start right away, and on the first meeting was able to easily pick up two

things in Nevril's approach that are not likely to work for our job market.

Firstly (and Steve maintains that this has been true for all three mentees he has mentored) Nevril was using a CV format which was designed typically and essentially for the UK job market. In the UK employers like a very short CV, as they have little time to read a lengthy version, so in many cases applicants submit not much more than a page. By contrast, New Zealand employers like to know more about the applicant, in particular their personal attributes and interpersonal skills, and so the pair agreed that these should be given more priority in the CV than sections such as qualifications and experience.

Secondly, Steve picked up that Nevril could better understand and make more of the typical New Zealand interview style. Again Nevril was approaching this according to where he had come from, which was to use a structured, formal style. By contrast, he was finding that Kiwi interviewers take a less formal approach, and comments: "It's semi-formal, but not casual enough to completely let your guard down. I had to be friendly and approachable, but also assertive. It's quite difficult to know how to be if it's not what you're used to."

Sorting out Nevril's CV was a quick and easy task. More challenging was building his confidence for the interviews. For the first few meetings with all his mentees, Steve treats the session like an interview. He maintains that initially they find this quite daunting, but it is a practical, 'dry run' way of helping them become familiar with our interview style, which in his words, "is about giving it all that you've got from the moment you walk through the door."

Steve mentored Nevril in such a way, that by the time he left the sessions he was feeling good about himself, or as Steve puts it, "pretty fired up". Encouragement was the core component, and Steve believes that this is essential for the effective mentoring of skilled immigrants, because of the hard time they have looking for work over several

months: "Mentoring is more about encouragement than anything else... The mentees have been bashed about through a number of rejections by the time I see them, so it's just a matter of actually getting them back to a good place about themselves again. And once they get there it does not take long before they are liked by the prospective interviewers."

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Steve

During sessions the pair was able to post mortem several of Nevril's unsuccessful interviews, and discuss the kinds of questions likely to be asked in the future. Steve helped Nevril to analyse why questions are asked in a certain way, and give scenarios of how they should be answered for maximum impact. Further input Steve had for Nevril was to 'have fun' with the interview i.e. to treat it as your own, and see it as a two-way opportunity. It is as much for the interviewee to see if he/she wants to work for this company, as it is for the interviewer to make their choice. Nevril maintains that this tip was critical to help him build his confidence for the interview experience, and he was able to attend an interview at Griffin's Foods, which afforded him a practical experience of 'having fun' with an interview.

The Critical Difference: Energy and Confidence

Both Steve and Nevril maintain that the critical difference in successfully landing a role in the New Zealand job market is energy and confidence during the interview. This is true for any applicant, but more so for immigrants who also have to

overcome any resistance to their cultural difference that may be present. Steve has observed how with the recession, currently employers tend to prefer to hire born and bred Kiwis, and says that this attitude, along with the

insistence that skilled immigrants have New Zealand workplace experience without giving them the opportunity to get that experience, are both "backward" and "incestuous". He maintains that the way over any extra hurdle that there may be for the skilled immigrant, is to perform much better in the interview than anyone else, and so in the interests of assisting mentees with this, has given considerable thought to the psyche of our interview process (which seems to be fairly unique to New Zealand).

Steve sees several stepped requirements for the applicant to be successful: First up, is the fact that the interviewers have seen the applicant's CV, so they know who they're talking to: qualifications, skills, and experience. The second requirement then, (and this is all they're *actually* asking during the interview) is will this person be a good fit in our team? Invariably interview questions centre around this aspect. And then if more than one person could fit the team, the only thing that it comes down to is enthusiasm, which is the final and deciding requirement. Therefore energy and confidence go a long way during the interview because they leave the best impression of an enthusiastic and motivated applicant.

Nevril recognises this approach, and contrasts it with his experience from overseas: "In the UK when you go for an interview, they want to see your *qualifications*. Whereas here I am yet to show my qualifications to a single interviewer. And further all the interview questions were not about my qualifications or my technical experience, it was more about my behaviour and competencies rather than 'if I gave you a sample how would you analyse it?'" He further comments that interviews here tend to be much longer than in the UK and tend to target the person rather than the role. Initially Nevril found this daunting, but

with Steve's mentoring was able to get the hang of it, especially since Steve encouraged him to be motivated, optimistic and relaxed.

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Nevril

Nevril has seen how the need for energy, motivation and confidence go beyond the interview, and into the workplace. He comments: "I can now understand why employers place so much emphasis on enthusiasm and having a cheerful face all the time. They know the pressure that's going to come your way. Now that I have been at Douglas for several months, I have noticed that there is quite a lot of pressure, compared to the UK. In the UK you work in a very large organisation with several people and the structure is quite rigid. At Douglas the workload that is given to you is so varied involving multiple projects, that if you do *not* have the energy, you will just not be able to cope, and your stress levels will go through the roof. "

The Breakthrough

Nevril tells the story of how he got his great job at Douglas Pharmaceuticals:

"In June this year I was going to an interview with Griffins Foods and I told Steve about it. And he said: 'Well done on getting the interview. Relax and have that energy boost, it's what they're looking for.' So I took that on board, went to Griffins, just played it cool, enjoyed the interview process, because in my mind I was saying there would be other interviews coming up. I took what

Steve advised me, went there and gave it my best, and I will say that fortunately I did not get that position because it was not really what I was looking for. If I had got that position, I would have taken it as a temporary job since it required me to work in the twilight shift. Looking back at it, I am glad I did not get selected for that position.

"Soon after that I had another interview lined up at Douglas Pharmaceuticals... and this role perfectly fitted with what I was looking for, as the hours

were seven thirty to four, Monday to Friday. It further would use all my skills that I brought into New Zealand, both qualifications and experience. I have no doubt in my mind saying this job is exactly what I was looking for."

As Production Documentation Specialist, Nevril coordinates and manages projects, helps with the continuous improvement (lean manufacturing) of

the site, is involved in training, and is responsible for researching and bringing new equipment into the company. Steve comments that, "It's a very meaty role without having a manager's huge salary", and as for working at Douglas Pharmaceuticals, Nevril maintains that the standards are on a par, if not better, than Unilever in London.

Looking Back

Reflecting on the mentoring match, Steve says the time commitment and effort spent were not a big ask for him. He also believes it really is not a big ask for anybody, and that everyone who has done well in their career should at some time start mentoring. He feels he gets a lot out of it, but the most enjoyable aspect is when the mentees arrive through his door "dejected and a bit down-trodden", and then leave after the session with "a smiling face, lots of energy, almost skipping out the office!"

When asked how much difference he believes he made to Nevril, he believes it really is to a small degree. For him the essential value that he brought to Nevril, was being able to see what is in Nevril, what he has to offer, – qualities that Nevril couldn't see about himself – and then encouraging him to make sure the interviewer could see these as well.

Nevril gives a huge accolade to Steve: "Steve helped me get the job, because it was Steve who showed me that the most important thing an employer is looking for is your energy levels."

Nevril enjoyed the meetings with Steve immensely, but comments on a particular moment when he had to face and accept the realities of trying to find work in New Zealand without any local experience. The disjuncture, frequently experienced by skilled immigrants, between the big welcome given by the Department of Immigration, and the realities of a labour market that is not as open, was in his estimation, "the hardest thing for me to digest".

Drawing out the essential difference in looking for work, when comparing New Zealand to the UK, he says that here work seekers search based on their personal attributes and interpersonal skills. By contrast in the UK the job hunt is predominantly based on qualifications.

Nevril's Tips for Skilled Immigrants:

- On your CV put your personal attributes first. Place less emphasis on your qualifications and what you have learnt through studying, and stress what you have done practically.
- Take each interview as a learning process, and consider it as a two-way experience, where you can decide whether or not you want to work at that company.
- When you are not successful, take the skills you have attained in the interview and put them to use in the next one. Always ask for feedback from the interviewer to find out how you could improve.
- Most importantly, keep your energy levels up and have a proactive, positive attitude.

Steve's Tips for Mentors:

- Be precise and get to the heart of the challenges faced by the mentee as soon as possible.
- Give a lot of encouragement and help to keep the mentee's morale up.
- Help the mentee to develop confidence in themselves and their personal attributes, and to convey this during the interview.
- Talk about possible interview scenarios and questions, and do role-plays of these.
- Get the mentee to include on their CV, the fact that they are an OMEGA Programme participant.
- Arrange the mentoring sessions for the middle of the day when energy levels are balanced, and the mentee is at their best: fully woken up and not yet tired.
- Have fun and enjoy the sessions.