

A Mentoring Case Story: Interview Preparation

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The Mentee

Vaughan Granier

From: Dubai & South Africa
Sector: Human Resources
Current Role: Human Resources Manager
Employed by: A leading electronics company

The Granier family arrived in New Zealand from Dubai in April 2009, where Vaughan had been part of the management team of a construction company. When looking for a change from the stresses of a six day, 75 hour week, they felt that New Zealand would be a wonderful and obvious country in which to raise their young family, especially since Vaughan's wife and children are Kiwis.

Originally an attorney and state prosecutor, Vaughan tired of the legal sector, made the switch to HR in 1985, and worked his way to a senior level. Prior to arriving in New Zealand, Vaughan had been advised that to find work he should network extensively, rather than relying on his CV, so he met with as many employment agencies and companies as possible. On a visit to Emergent, he was told about OMEGA, so registered on the website, and was shortly allocated a mentor.

By the time he first began meeting with Lauren he had submitted over 70 CVs across New Zealand, and had not been called for a single interview. When asking for feedback, Vaughan was told that there was a slump in the market; that there were a lot of New Zealanders looking for work, so it was not necessary to employ foreigners; and that companies were looking for applicants who had a good understanding of New Zealand HR law.

The Match

Vaughan had realised that practising HR in New Zealand was really different to what he had experienced in Dubai, so when he started the OMEGA mentoring, he was looking for guidance in finding employment, and help to pick up HR best

The Mentor

Lauren Pearson

From: New Zealand, United Kingdom & Namibia
Sector: Human Resources
Current Role: Manager - Talent & Executive Development
Employed by: BNZ

With a background in psychotherapy and HR, Lauren looks after talent management processes, as well as the executive and key talent programmes at BNZ. She is also personally committed to helping fellow immigrants to settle and work in New Zealand.

Lauren says she has three main reasons for mentoring skilled immigrants:

Firstly, whilst in the UK she worked with immigrants from all over the world, and saw the difficulties they had in fitting into different workplaces. Being able to help them adapt to different workplace cultures was quite satisfying for her at the time, and she saw the OMEGA Mentoring Programme as a way to help immigrants in New Zealand.

Secondly, BNZ is a strategic partner of OMEGA. As part of this relationship, BNZ staff have the opportunity to mentor skilled migrants to help them find employment.

Lastly, when Lauren herself immigrated to New Zealand seven years ago, she was able to find work relatively easily. She also realised that it helped to have someone to talk to who had shared the same experiences.

practice. He had also been told that South Africans are sometimes perceived as overly assertive and even arrogant in the corporate workplace. His further expectation from the mentoring sessions was for guidance with his cultural fit and the

transition he would have to make to adapt his management style to what was acceptable in New Zealand.

By the time Vaughan had finished the mentoring, he had submitted over 80 CVs and had only been through one interview process. With her background in talent development, Lauren thought she could see two possible reasons why Vaughan was not getting noticed: Firstly, the CV needed to be reworked to tell Vaughan's story in a more positive, yet shorter way. Lauren felt that Vaughan was underselling himself. The second reason Lauren had observed was that the recession had heightened the tendency for New Zealand companies to want to employ New Zealanders rather than new arrivals to the country – a trend that is understandable.

If I remove the input I've had, considering how long it took me to get the first interview, it is possible that I would have continued without success for a long time, even though I had been proactive. The mentoring made a big difference and it did so because I was willing to listen to it... and do some serious changing in how I did things at a core level.

Vaughan

The fact that Vaughan's CV needed to be reworked was difficult for him to hear: "I was *shocked* to realise my CV was not up to the mark. I've read thousands of CVs and employed hundreds of

people over the years, so I thought I knew what a CV should look like." He says that on reflection though, it was true that his CV did not quite calibrate with the New Zealand market, which needs shorter more precise descriptions, and more attention to the section on competencies and transferable skills. So he did an extensive rework that "made a big difference when I saw the before and after: I liked the before, but I *loved* the after. It was a real step forward in terms of communicating who I am". As for the preference of New Zealand companies wanting to employ New Zealanders, Vaughan says he came here knowing that this was the reality, and that he could understand it. But he was prepared to do what was needed to get past this obstacle and into a good job.

Apart from reworking the CV, the pair had general conversations about what Vaughan could do; discussions on creative ideas. Lauren maintains that through these conversations Vaughan "remembered what he knew" and that this enabled him to get the interview and then the job. She comments how when someone is out of work, "they start to lose confidence and begin to question their experience", and how immigrating can easily disorientate a person in their search for work – no matter how skilled and experienced they may be.

"I remember saying to him at one point 'You've remembered who you are and what you can achieve and that's the first step to finding employment here'. Your self-confidence has been battered through rejections, there's a new child [in the Granier family's case], there's a lot going on and it's very easy to forget what you've achieved, who you are and where you come from. I think our time together was about helping him to remember that."

The Critical Difference: Interview Preparation

A particular discussion stands out for Lauren and Vaughan, and it took place the night before Vaughan's interview. Vaughan had in hand the job description for the role at a leading electronics company, and using this Lauren facilitated a mock interview, during which several key learnings emerged for Vaughan:

Firstly Lauren found that his answers to questions were quite high level, and came across as vague. She comments how at the time she knew Vaughan knew the answers, but as an interviewee he wasn't

giving enough detail to inspire confidence. Lauren worked with him on how to answer the questions by using specific examples from his achievements instead of strategic, high level answers. It became clear to Vaughan that this would help him to showcase himself and what *he* had done, rather than his team, environment or context. Vaughan says that this was really key for him and changed his approach to the interview, because he had been used to discussing things at an executive level around board room tables: "My interview strategy had been to talk about what I had done at a

strategic level, but Lauren brought me back down to earth with practical 'how to' examples."

The second thing that Vaughan was able to take away from the mock interview was a renewed confidence in his track record. Having been unemployed for four months (after the unique experience of working in Dubai for several years), Vaughan maintains that he had forgotten a lot of the HR fundamentals that he had been using everyday. Using the mock interview to highlight these fundamentals helped to restore his confidence in his track record, his accomplishments and the breadth of his exposure. He says: "I had not focussed on the basics and had been feeling negative about my credibility in the New Zealand market, but after that mock interview I was able to walk into the actual interview the next day with real confidence."

The third learning, Vaughan describes as "the elephant in the room". He says that prior to arriving here, he had been alerted to 'the South African approach', but did not really know what this meant, and whether it might relate to him. He felt that he was simply being natural and true to himself, but that this might be culturally different and make it difficult for others to accept him. Lauren and Vaughan were able to talk about this and look at different communication styles and what was acceptable in a South African office versus a similar work environment here. Vaughan was able to see how our approach to communication in the workplace is more suggestive and proposal focussed than the South African manner, which tends towards being

decisive and forthright. He says it was really good to be able to recalibrate his personal communication style – both written and verbal – and begin to use words that helped him to come across in a more acceptable manner.

Through the mock interview process two important interview questions emerged that made Vaughan realise he needed to be prepared in advance. The first related to his limited understanding of New Zealand employment law. When he initially arrived in the country, Vaughan became a member of EMA (Employers and Manufacturers Association) and had this resource available. He was therefore able to say at his interview that he was using EMA's resources to gain a better understanding of employment law. He was also already a member of HRINZ (The Human Resources Institute of New Zealand), and had read extensively on New Zealand workplace law, culture and leadership.

The second related to the fact that Vaughan needed to demonstrate his commitment and passion for the job itself. He realised how important it was during the interview to communicate his commitment to New Zealand, to its economy and environment. He tried to show that by employing him, his new employer would not be employing someone who was experimenting with the market, but someone really committed to New Zealand as their new permanent home.

The Breakthrough

The mock interview was a critical turning point for Vaughan. He says it prepared him fully for the real thing, and along with the rest of Lauren's mentoring, helped him land the job at his new company.

"I basically applied for a position online through *Seek* and the agent who had posted it was Emergent, who I had already visited. I also applied for another anonymous position through another agency and it was the same position, so my CV was coming through two routes to this prospective employer. Eventually I met up with the agent from Emergent and she enjoyed the first interview and put my name forward. I then had a meeting with the temporary HR person who was consulting to

the company and hiring for the permanent position.

"At this point I realised I needed to boost my confidence. I was very nervous and that's when I did the mock interview with Lauren. After that I was interviewed by the Regional HR Manager, and was offered the job, which I accepted. At this point, the company decided to rescope the position which added another step to the process. I had to be interviewed by the Regional Director, and then the final interview was with the MD. This took a total of three and a half weeks, and five interviews to get the job, which I did by the grace of God."

Looking Back

Reflecting on the mentoring sessions, Lauren felt that the real value came from how proactive Vaughan was. After their conversations, he would immediately action what they agreed on and it was this approach that eventually translated into him getting the job.

Vaughan admits that he made the decision to trust Lauren's advice and that he was committed to the mentoring process. He also believes that as an immigrant, you need to be open to new ways of working. He says he learnt not to rely on his track record, and to really prepare himself for how he comes across to others, and comments: "If I remove the input I've had, considering how long it took me to get the first interview, it is possible that I would have continued without success for a long time, even though I had been proactive. The mentoring made a big difference and it did so because I was willing to listen to it... and do some serious changing in how I did things at a core level. That was ultimately what made the difference in the end and resulted in me getting the job."

Vaughan says that Lauren underestimates the role she played as his mentor, and that every time they interacted, she gave him quality advice. He felt her commitment to mentoring far exceeded his expectations. Lauren maintains that mentoring is not a big ask, especially if both parties are flexible about how and when it happens. The highlight for her was hearing that Vaughan had got the job, because she knew that this would help him settle into life in New Zealand quicker.

Lauren is committed to the Mentoring Programme, and says there is a lot that she gets out of the process. Having a background in psychotherapy, she really enjoys the one-on-one conversations;

the fact that these are in a corporate setting, and are therefore able to bring two parts of her skill set together. She is also excited by BNZ's commitment to connecting with people on a community level, and the idea of a cosmopolitan country able to embrace all cultures and get the best out of these cultures for New Zealand and its future: "OMEGA as an organisation are definitely walking the talk. Even though there are areas of skills shortages, people with those skills are still struggling to find work. However OMEGA is facilitating that connection. If we are serious about embracing difference and being a multi-cultural society then the innovation that comes out of diversity will tick all those boxes. OMEGA helps to pull together the various strands into something tangible that we can all get involved in."

Looking back on the process of searching for work in New Zealand, Vaughan says that the job market he comes from does not rely on networks for sourcing employment, and even with the size of it very few networks are required for someone to do their job well. He contrasts this with the job market here, and says this is very much a relationship-based environment. He says that realising this caused him to shift his whole approach to finding work: "Initially I applied for jobs just through *Seek* and other websites. I stopped doing that and I started meeting people, going to their offices, asking for time, making a point of developing direct contact with them so that if my CV ever arrived on their desk, they had a face and personality they could match it to. Although I can't directly say that is what made a difference, it was a significant shift in how I approached the job market and that was an important realisation."

Lauren and Vaughan's Tips for Skilled Immigrants:

- Be proactive and take responsibility to position yourself within the New Zealand job market. Don't sit back and wait for things to happen.
- Build a network where you can interact with people who have shared similar experiences. Highlight difficult issues you might face, and discuss these with them.
- Once you start working, show everyone that you are committed and here to stay. Make it clear that New Zealand is your home, and that you are fully committed to living and working here.
- Anywhere in the world, the local market probably prefers to employ local people. Overcome this by demonstrating that an employer is not going to lose instant relevancy by choosing you, or have to wait six months before you adjust. New Zealand is very multicultural – the benefit of diversity to your prospective employer is also a potential advantage to them.
- Be prepared for a longer period of unemployment than you might expect – partly due to the current recession, but also to the fact that New Zealand is a smaller job market. Prepare yourself emotionally and mentally for it to take some time.
- Embrace New Zealand, roll up your sleeves, make the most of being here, and be positive.
- Make an effort to make Kiwi friends, and don't just hang out with people from your country of origin. Integrate into the whole of society, not just into work.
- Broaden your social group as this helps you to settle in.

Lauren and Vaughan's Tips for Mentors:

- Be culturally sensitive and aware that the mentee has a lot on his/her plate. Leaving one's country of birth is a stressful decision, so be aware of that and the real difficulties that come with a change of this magnitude.
- Try and get a full understanding of who the mentee is and what they can do, rather than working with what they present at face value.
- Use tough love when you need to - say it like it is.