



The slippery slope of managing migrants in your workforce

A multicultural workforce presents challenges to Kiwi employers who need to learn how to manage diversity and tap into the opportunities that come with migrants who don't necessarily see the world through Kiwi eyes.

BY VAL LEVESON

David Morritt, chief executive of Integration Technologies, knows it is hard employing a diverse workforce. It takes real effort. "We encourage applicants from different countries," Morritt says. "Our diverse workforce complements our offering. "It can be hard sometimes but it's certainly worth the effort."

Palmerston North-based Integration Technologies employs 11 people but

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > Having someone on board who knows the language and understands the culture of your target market can be extremely helpful.
- > A diverse workforce can bring innovation to your organisation.
- > There are challenges if cross-cultural issues are not managed properly.
- > It can be difficult to communicate with people of diverse cultures - and communication can break down completely.
- > Merely employing people of different cultures doesn't hack it - good management and planning are required.

it exports to 45 countries. "It's a huge advantage having employees from different cultural backgrounds and languages, particularly when it comes to understanding our clients."

Morritt says in the company's day-to-day business it's easy to forget how diverse its customers are.

The company relies on its website for business. "Most of our customers interact with the website. We've had to design it in such a way that it easily carries across to different cultures. We need to make sure that someone in Russia, or Chile, can pick up what we're saying even if they have poor English skills."

NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS

"By employing people who are not English speaking, we see on a daily basis how they struggle. Internally we have to be careful of how we communicate things - if someone in Argentina, say, contacts us, we have to replicate the information we have

"Another issue we have found is that, particularly if the employee is first generation, they can move on quickly to another job and we have to start the cycle over again. This is something we just have to accept."

BENEFITS OF DIVERSITY

Regardless of the drawbacks, employing immigrants has been beneficial for the company, Morritt says. "Employees from other countries can bring as much as New Zealanders and more - their culture and language."

His team includes Kiwis, English, Chinese and Filipinos. In the past there have been Brazilians and Indians as well.

He said "culture clash" was too strong a word to describe problems he had experienced. "It's just about getting some people to open up as we would like them to. Kiwis are very open. We want our staff to engage at that level."

He says his company encourages employees' spouses and children to

visit the office and feel a connection to Dad or Mum's work. "We encourage family values - this is important to us."

When selecting candidates, he says all go through the same process. "We take applications from anyone and look for a rounded package - skills, education, fit - and we see an added benefit in cultural knowledge and language ability. These are things we can use to the company's advantage."

Omega is an organisation which is keen to tap into the skills migrants contribute to the workforce in the Auckland region. The company helps place migrants in the workforce.

Director Justin Treagus says: "It just makes sense to employ immigrants. There are huge benefits. For example, if you're launching in China, having people in your employ who understand the market and the culture can save you from many pitfalls."

CULTURE DOESN'T MEAN CAPACITY

Treagus says the question is how do you build this capacity into your business; merely employing people of different cultures doesn't hack it. "Thinking companies have stepped up in this area. Global companies have well-developed expat models."

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JOHN SECCOMBE - AQUAHORT

and make it easy to understand. We're aware that long, involved, complicated sentences don't work."

Another exporter, John Seccombe of Aquahort, says he's travelled for business a lot and found that there are lots of difficulties with working across cultures. "Culturally there are different ways of thinking and doing business and things are open to severe communication problems."

"Managers need to be mindful of different cultural needs and social pecking orders in other cultures. They also need to be aware that what they see as unethical may be a cultural norm for another culture. They need to manage these things."

Morritt says there are drawbacks to employing immigrants. "It can be difficult to communicate with people of diverse cultures. We find that initially it can be really hard to draw someone out and get them to interact."

"We're a small team and can't afford communication problems. So we take our time in sitting with these employees and draw them into conversation, getting them used to the company culture."



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DAVID MORRITT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, INTEGRATION TECHNOLOGIES



“FOR EXAMPLE, IF YOU ARE EYEING CHINA AS A MARKET, LOOK INTO BRINGING IN CHINESE EMPLOYEES NOW. MAKE SURE THAT WHEN YOU MOVE INTO THE MARKET YOU HAVE PEOPLE IN PLACE WHO YOU TRUST AND WHO UNDERSTAND THE VALUES/CULTURE OF YOUR ORGANISATION.”

JUSTIN TREAGUS – DIRECTOR OF OMEGA

“They see it as having cultural intelligence. However, there are challenges in employing immigrants and it has to be managed well.”

Treagus says it’s about long-term vision. “For example, if you are eyeing China as a market, look into bringing in

Chinese employees now. Make sure that when you move into the market you have people in place who you trust and who understand the values/culture of your organisation.”

He says diversity is not turned on like a tap. “There are no instantly diverse

teams — they take time to develop, they grow organically. You need to think of the different dynamic that’s created and how it needs to be managed.

“Otherwise things can be quite catastrophic. You don’t want culture failure in your organisation. This is breakdown of teams where staff members are not connecting or communicating and there is a breakdown of trust.”

Omega has programmes to help skilled immigrants enter the New Zealand workforce.

“Mentoring is a tangible way of supporting skilled immigrants, and helps business people get to know more about how diversity can work for them,” Treagus says.

“Why not mentor someone? It gives you exposure and the opportunity to really have a conversation with someone and talk about workplace culture. You can take on an intern for a three-month contract. It’s a learning curve for you and the employee.” [END]

VAL LEVESON / WRITER



Val is an Auckland-based sub-editor and freelance writer who covers career issues, technology and business trends. She has worked at the Northern Advocate in Whangarei, the Manawatu Evening Standard in Palmerston North and The New Zealand Herald in Auckland.

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