



Bridging

The “Kiwi Experience” Gap

IT'S A CATCH 22 FOR MIGRANTS We invite them to our country because we need their skills – but then either reject or underutilise their input because they lack “Kiwi” work experience. Can mentoring make a difference? by Vicki Jayne

When Caroline Ongleo arrived here last year from the Philippines, she was understandably nervous about getting work. NZ Immigration had opened the door but there was no job waiting and a recession was in full swing.

Would she suffer the same fate of other skilled Filipino migrants – returning home with hopes of a new life dashed because the talents that put them on the immigration ‘wanted’ list had failed to find an outlet?

“I had heard lots of stories of people who hadn’t been able to find work that was right for them,” says Ongleo. “And I knew it wouldn’t be good for me to be underemployed – to take on menial work or odd jobs. But Immigration wanted me to arrive before a certain date so there was no turning back. I had to be brave enough to face the challenge.”

It’s an increasingly common challenge. Our economy’s reliance on foreign skills has climbed rapidly over the past decade – from just 37,546 work permit approvals in 2000 to 136,481 in 2009.

While the biggest single source of these workers is still the UK (20,315 in the past year), arrivals from less traditional sources make up an increasingly larger proportion of the total. Figures for 2009 show major sources include China (12,592), India (9019), Germany (8713) and the Philippines (6867).

Although New Zealand’s immigration policy specifically targets migrants whose skills and qualifications will be most useful to our economy, getting them plugged into the right powerpoint in terms of employment is more problematical. The apocryphal stories of foreign physicists running cafes or skilled engineers driving taxis are often, sadly, accurate.

And one of the biggest hurdles newcomers face is their lack of local knowledge and networks – employers often prefer “Kiwi experience” over superior qualifications that come in a more culturally diverse package.

Ongleo came with a PhD in environmental science and an impressive background of management in the not-



Mentoring helps bridge the ‘experience’ gap – Caroline Ongleo and Terri-Ann Scorer.

for-profit sector – but she also got some timely local help. Soon after arriving, she attended an Auckland Chamber of Commerce short course, saw a presentation about a programme called OMEGA and signed up.

“At the time I didn’t have much information about it but a couple of weeks later heard that I’d been matched with a



mentor. I didn't know this person and was both nervous and curious about how they could help me."

That mentor was Terri-Ann Scorer who, as principal of Boston Consulting, had been involved in helping OMEGA make the shift from pilot programme (originally set up by the Committee of Auckland with Tindall Foundation funding) to a stand-alone entity. When she was then invited to be a mentor, she was delighted.

"I'm really quite passionate about the aims of this programme. For me this disconnect between an immigration policy that attracts skilled people to this country but then can't deliver jobs that match their skills is a real shame. Mentors can help bridge the gap – finding a pathway for people to contribute at the level they can and want to."

Launched in 2008, OMEGA takes an average of 40 skilled immigrants into its programme every month – they mainly come from the Philippines, India and South Africa. More than 80 percent who complete the programme have found work relevant to their skills and experience.

For Ongleo the help became quite specific as she'd already got an interview for a role at The Peace Foundation and needed to quickly get up to speed with the structure of local not-for-profit communities and the Kiwi management culture.

"Terri-Ann helped me with the application and interview process but most especially adjusting to the local workplace. That helped me build my confidence."

After three interviews, Ongleo got the job and has since been promoted to programme director.

Often it's fear of the unknown that

"IT'S INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT WHEN WE INVITE PEOPLE INTO OUR COUNTRY THAT WE CREATE SPACE FOR THEM TO FULLY PARTICIPATE."

– PAULINE WINTER



prompts organisations to stick with locals rather than employ immigrants and Scorer says the backing from OMEGA gives would-be employers more confidence – knowing candidates have been vetted and have local support as well as access to local networks.

For the new arrivals, it's about alleviating confusions and building confidence.

"As a migrant it can be difficult. I wondered should I play down my qualifications? Are they too intimidating?" says Ongleo. "Talking that through made a difference in my confidence – in who I am. And when I was asked do I have Kiwi contacts and can I get references, I could confidently say 'yes'. Employers don't want someone who is not connected."

Scorer was also able to make the inevitable period of adjustment to local conditions easier for Ongleo's new employer by helping them put together an induction programme.

One of 195 volunteer mentors, Scorer reckons the benefits run both ways. Leveraging her own contacts to help Ongleo made her more aware of just how extensive her network has become since she arrived in New Zealand to head Oxfam in

1999. The different nature of the mentor-mentee relationship has also improved her own team management skills.

"When you're coaching your own team you are ultimately being judged on what your team can do – what's good about this is that it forces you to give a bit more space and frame up your ideas or input in a really general way. I think that actually makes you a better manager in your day job because you give people a bit more space."

Beyond the individual mentor-mentee benefits are those to the wider business community as well as to this country's economic and social wellbeing. As an exporting country, New Zealand has to strengthen its links to and knowledge of offshore markets – and employees who bring those links with them are a very useful resource.

That Auckland is now among the five most ethnically diverse cities of the world gives it a major edge – if the talents of its growing immigrant population are well utilised.

"Often we look at this [diversity] as being problem-centred rather than an opportunity," notes OMEGA chair Pauline



Justin Treagus: Mentoring matchmaker.

Winter. “I think it is crucial to have the right environment – an openness and willingness to participate – so we remove those obstacles and barriers that prevent people from actively engaging and making a full contribution.”

Long term it’s also about future-proofing New Zealand against growing global skills shortages, says OMEGA director Justin Treagus.

“It may seem less relevant in a recession when fewer companies are hiring, but as things pick up we’ll quickly be back in the position of competing for a shrinking pool of talent. OMEGA is firmly of the

belief this is not a tap you can suddenly turn on so unless New Zealand starts taking steps now and leading toward being ahead of the game then we’re really going to struggle in the future.”

He says OMEGA offers low-risk, cost-effective hiring solutions with its internship programme. “People can give someone an opportunity and at the same time get access to great talent – and that’s a real win-win.”

Involvement in mentoring also offers good opportunities for companies to expose their staff to different cultures as well as enhance their own coaching skills.

“There are some wonderful change agents who are thinking differently about diversity and about the talent they hire and that is a key thing.”

Reaction from the growing number of organisations OMEGA works with has been very positive. “They recognise the importance of what we’re doing and when you look at the calibre of the funding partners we’ve got on board, it’s very encouraging.

“OMEGA is very grateful for the involvement of these partner organisations, but is appealing to others to get

involved. This is not exclusively an HR issue. What is needed here is for line managers to stand up and take ownership for ensuring the sustainability of our future workforce. This means thinking differently about the people being hired, and getting involved – not leaving it all to HR.”

For migrants – both newcomers and those already here – it’s a very welcome intervention. There are stories of people who’ve been working as cleaners finally being able to contribute their expertise in architecture; of newcomers able to fill in when their mentor goes on leave.

“The saddest thing,” says Treagus, “is to see people who arrive here full of hope and energy losing heart either because they can’t get interviews or because interviews fail to lead to jobs. They become very different people in terms of their confidence and belief they can make it here. Some settle for underemployment and there’s a growing body of evidence to show that the longer people take to find the right job, then the less likely they are to get it.”

He’d like to have his office at the airport to catch people when they arrive – and to have an even greater range and number of mentors to provide the best possible match for them. Winter agrees.

“On a personal basis I think it’s incredibly important that when we invite people into our country that we create the space for them to be able to fully participate in a way I guess they would have imagined before they got here. I think we are improving in this but we still have a long way to go. So it is about New Zealanders maturing, looking at the world differently and looking at how we add value to our country by welcoming new skills and new ways of doing things.” **M**

OMEGA QUICK FACTS

Programme launched in 2008 to help fast-track skilled immigrants into employment that matches their qualifications and skill levels.

Facilitates occupation-specific mentoring – matching skilled immigrants with business professionals who share the same skills and industry knowledge.

Current profile:

- 222 mentoring matches
- 195 volunteer mentors
- 84 companies represented (by volunteer mentors)
- 52 countries represented (by skilled immigrants)

Organisations supplying the greatest number of mentors are: Auckland City Council, BNZ, ANZ National, Beca, and Waitakere City Council.