

'Osmosis' no way to find talent

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The global skill shortage continues despite the economy and New Zealand businesses are not always poised to attract the best talent, says intercultural communications specialist Taruni Falconer.

"We've got an international talent war and our DIY approach of: 'Oh well, I'll figure it out by osmosis' just doesn't work," Falconer says.

Falconer is the managing director and founder of Intercultural Dynamics, and says businesses need to become smarter at using the culturally diverse talent that's available.

"In New Zealand the early thinking was: 'You come in and be like us.' But that model is no longer working for us globally."

Falconer is not talking about some 'PC' nuances but real tangible differences in the way people interact.

"The way that we interview and induct is very very culturally biased for the most part. We can actually improve our chances as employers of both recruiting and inducting and then, the biggie, retaining if we're more clued up about this."

It's particularly true when a third of Aucklanders and a fourth of all New Zealanders were born outside the country. In fact, the OECD ranks New Zealand at number four when it comes to the number of foreign born people in the country. New Zealanders value employees quite differently than they are valued in other cultures, she says.

"Mostly we value egalitarianism in terms of gender, race and age and we look for skill sets."

But more often immigrants value rank over egalitarianism. They believe rank creates stability and a well organised culture. These differences are apparent from the very first contact between a potential employer and a candidate.

"It turns up in things like unusual layouts on CVs. You'll get people coming from places like Chile or Korea or China or India which are layered and formal and hierarchical. There the employer determines the potential and qualifications of the person based on their degree and the reputation of their university."

Kiwis prefer to focus on a skill-set match. Even cover letters show cultural differences.

"I hear New Zealand employers saying, 'Oh, but they use such flowery language. Why don't they cut to heart of the matter? Why aren't they explicit?'"

Falconer says employers need to be thinking more bi-directionally. Interview styles will vary greatly among cultures. For instance, someone from a hierarchical culture who is told they can call the interviewer by their first name might be very taken aback and feel uncomfortable. The way people come across in an interview is as

much cultural as it is personal. Candidates from Korea or Northern China might not seem emotionally expressive because such emotion is not considered proper form back home. Sometimes South Africans might come across as aggressive, but it's only because that's what's been required of them to survive in their home country.

"If you come from a place like Pretoria or Johannesburg or Durham and you are not very very assertive in terms of how you deal with ensuring that you get an interview in the first place and then how you conduct yourself in an interview, through a New Zealander's eyes that looks pushy and aggressive."

Americans often come across as overly self-promoting.

"If you live in the States, a core value is, 'It's up to you.' If you don't self-promote, no one else will do it for you."

The way people promote themselves for a job is quite culturally dependant. New Zealand employers expect job candidates to tout their accomplishments during an interview. But in other cultures, that's just not appropriate.

"The whole concept of accomplishments is a very Anglo Saxon and European - particularly west European. In Pacific Island and East Asian countries, people don't put themselves forward. The expectation is that others will do that on their behalf, so they downplay accomplishments. Their CVs are often devoid of accomplishments."

To avoid these issues, Falconer suggests companies spell out what they expect. Put samples up on their website of how they expect a CV to be structured. Explicitly tell candidates advance how an interview is going to be structured and that they will be expected to discuss specific accomplishments.

"We want to hear something about what your skill set looks like in action. We want to hear about your transferrable skills."

The cultural rift is also evident when people actually sit down to do the job.

"Our teams we have in companies are often quite collaborative and when a team leader gives instructions, there will be a lot that is implicit in the instructions. There will be a lot that is leaving things to the initiative of the team member."

But people from hierarchical societies expect more detailed instructions.

"They will expect to be shown how to do something much more. They will expect to check in a lot of times and ask: 'Is this what you want? Is this how to do it?'"

Falconer says immigrants from such workplaces are more accustomed to painting by numbers than by painting freehand. But this has no bearing on their actual ability. It's just the way they're used to working.

"They will be highly competent but they expect to be highly directed and that contravenes what we expect."

Even when it comes to the simple concept of setting a deadline for a task, New Zealanders bosses will often ask when the project can be completed, whereas an immigrant worker will expect to be given a set deadline for the job to be due.

Differences also show up in the induction process. Kiwi bosses are more prone to simply point someone to a desk and a phone and tell them to get on with it. But hierarchical immigrants will expect more guidance to become acclimated to the new workplace.

"There are multiple adjustments that companies can make in the way of preparing themselves, ensuring that people feel that they belong, that people feel secure. The number one thing that immigrants want is security."

Falconer says people just need to be more aware of these things and how they play out in the work environment.

"We forget that our way of going about the whole recruitment process is very culturally informed. We just forget. The responsibility for adjusting and modifying my behaviours and broadening my skill set is mine as well as the immigrant's. And that's a big shift."

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