

# Squandering a talent pool

Skilled migrants could greatly contribute to providing a solution to the skills shortage, but first we have to change our mindset, writes Val Leveson



OMEGA director Justin Treagus.

Picture / Ted Baghurst

The barriers that new immigrants face when trying to get into the labour market in New Zealand are complex, and it seems that while they have much to contribute to the country, particularly in the area of skills shortages, businesses are still being slow to take advantage. During the recession it may have seemed that skills shortages were no more – especially since most companies seemed to be actively cutting staff or not replacing those who were leaving, but this is not the case according to Roman Rogers, general manager, Hudson New Zealand. He says there will always be skills shortages within the New Zealand market. Rogers says that before the recession there was “definitely a shift towards employers being more open minded.” He says there was a greater acceptance of flexible working hours, helping mothers gets back into the workplace, employing people who decided to come back from retirement and the employment of immigrants. He says because the skills New Zealand is short of changes, there are challenges for immigrants with the time lag of the skills shortage happening and getting through the mechanics of getting here. “By the time some immigrants arrive after they’ve been accepted in to the country by government, the opportunities are already gone.” He said an example of this was seen in 2000/2001 in the IT field. “There was a massive skills shortage of good IT people, but floods of people arrived and the boom was soon gone. This left highly experienced and capable people without work.” He said it was looking as if the country was moving forward after the downturn last year, but there were big unknowns as to the available talent and the demand of that talent. “We are predicting a lift in demand, but not a rapid one.” He said it depended on how things played out. “Will New Zealanders be leaving for overseas again? It isn’t only traditionally the very young (Generation Y) that leave,

but the 30 somethings too.” There were also questions as to whether people who were planning to retire would hold on for longer because their retirement funds had taken a hit, Rogers says. Some people who retired early have returned to the workforce. Also immigration has slowed down. “All these things have an impact on immigrants,” says Rogers. However, he says that because companies became more open to employing immigrants before the recession, things were generally better for immigrants. “Many of us are risk adverse and know that making bad employment decisions can be costly. But because companies took on more immigrants previously, they have seen the advantages.” Rogers says the advantages are in filling skills shortages, and that creating diversity in the workplace is proven to have better outcomes – “The collective wisdom of people from different backgrounds is superior to a group from the same background.” Rogers said a couple of years ago Hudson did a survey, which indicated that new immigrants needed help in getting on in New Zealand. “The 2006/6 research showed that there were barriers to employers hiring immigrant employees.” Because of the survey, the Committee of Auckland decided to pull together resources and create mentoring opportunities. That was when Omega was established.

Justin Treagus, director of Omega, says the issues that new immigrants faced in getting into the labour market were complex. “In New Zealand often people get jobs because the employers know them. There’s a lot of networking, and new immigrants don’t have that social capital. This is an immediate disadvantage.” He says: “There also seems to be a conservative reluctance to hire individuals without local work experience. People also tend to hire like-minded people, and this is

masked around what they call a cultural fit.” He said there were practical issues too – how does a company get a reference from someone in another country who does not speak English? Treagus says: “We support businesses to take advantages of skills immigrants have to offer. There are great advantages to having a diverse workplace. It’s proven that it leads to greater innovation.” Omega offers a paid internship programme, where individuals get local experience, while businesses are taking minimal risks. “We work with businesses and look at best practice. How can Auckland businesses benefit from the future talent that will arrive on our shores? Let’s face it these days countries, and even cities within New Zealand, compete for talent. We need to attract the talent.” Treagus said Omega was also pushing for policy change; “Policies need to be looked at in order to get the right sort of people into the right industries.” Omega’s mentoring programme has been very beneficial, he says. “What’s often happened is a company has supported us by mentoring immigrants – they’ve helped them, coached them and often even eventually hired them. “Mentoring doesn’t cost much – and it adds to developing social responsibility. The mentors have the advantage of developing mentoring skills through us. The mentoring programme works as a change agent – many attitudes to immigrants are changed.” Treagus says: “If the people who come to New Zealand succeed, we all succeed. It’s all about helping NZ Inc. Immigrants are often people who have access to top markets – they’re people we gain a lot from. Many have a lot of leverage in their home countries. And then of course there are the skills shortages – we need to compete to get the best. “There are wonderful businesses in New Zealand doing great things – we encourage

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others to do the same,” he says. Rogers says for companies to employ immigrants successfully he urges them to be direct with employees. “Many are reluctant to be direct. But they come from other countries – and need to be told the rules so that they can develop a sense of belonging. “If your company has drinks on a Friday night, tell new employees and tell them that they’re invited. They may see people gathering and assume it’s a private thing that they’re not invited to and go home. In that case, the other employees may see them as stand-offish and not wanting to blend in. This sort of thing causes problems, and is completely avoidable.” He said the employees should also be given the opportunity to make suggestions. “In many things they come from a position of knowledge – and can contribute greatly to the business.” He says companies should be supportive of their immigrant employees, and their partners. “Often the partner struggles – and this can cause problems. Companies have a part to play in welcoming employees, otherwise the couple may not settle. Companies are seeing more and more how it’s not only important to attract good talent – but the ability to retain people is vital too.”