



ANNA CAMPBELL

Anna is a Director and Partner of AbacusBio Ltd, an agri-consulting company based in Dunedin. An innovative and strategic thinker, with a PhD in biotechnology, she endorses commercially focused science. Here Anna discusses how to promote the synergies between science and industry as a driver of New Zealand's future.

1. In the context of your professional background, what does 'talent' mean to you?

Number one would be the right attitude. The attitude has to be a person that is willing to really just come, bust a gut to learn and have that positive attitude around learning. For our company, we're particularly interested in the commercial angle as well as technical. You've got to have that grit and drive around entrepreneurship and the willingness to be in that commercial space because we're essentially a business. We have to make money because that's how we pay staff to keep going.

Everyone's going to be slightly different in the way they get business and deliver. People think that people have to be the extroverts to gain business. What we're seeing is that often introverts are getting the good relationships with clients and are very good at their work. They do the same thing but in a different way.

2. Are you aware of any talent gaps that exist or might arise within the next ten years?

This has probably been our biggest hold-back in terms of growth. We're growing about 20–30% a year and we could grow faster if we could get the right people. There are enormous talent gaps in agricultural science. We've got a really strong core base in what we call quantitative genetics, which is quite a specialised area. We have to look worldwide because we're not training enough of those people here. We couldn't attract people out of Europe to AbacusBio five or six years ago and now we can because of the global recession, and because we're now getting recognised as international experts in that quantitative genetics space for livestock.

3. How do successful organisations attract, keep and grow talent?

Thinking back to how we've evolved as a company, we've had to invest quite a lot ourselves to get those right people with the right skills through, currently we have PhD students who are embedded within our business. Part

of our philosophy has been to grow from within, and we've also used the intern programme reasonably well. It's a really good way for a small company to have a good look at young people and see where they fit. If they fit we just snap them up.

As we grow, and gain bigger contracts our challenge is to keep an innovative, energetic culture. For me personally, I've always had my three words: 'Make it happen' which drives me to not accept excuses from myself, or someone else if I really want something to happen.

4. Think about talent hubs around the world, what is cool and why?

In terms of talent hubs, we are evaluating this currently as we are concerned that agrifood business in the south doesn't have a strong voice to promote what we do and attract both people and investors. We have been looking at a German hub showcasing their business via the web and determining how we do that and other activities. In New Zealand one of our strengths is our humility, but it is also one of our weaknesses: to build global business we need to be

shouting from the rooftops about what we do. We're not so good at that and I think that's a real problem, and the further south you go, the worse it gets.

Food security is the global issue of our time, and for a business like ours the opportunities are incredible because we have the know-how from on the farm right through into the markets. What I'm worried about is that investors will come as far as say Waikato, and not come further south. Our hub will profile some of the innovative companies that are in the agrifood space that'll attract talent and young people into it. There's a lot of little companies around with the know-how that can be lifted into other countries and support this whole food security drive.

5. Can you assess New Zealand's performance in attracting talent on a global scale?

Other nationalities and talent do want to come to New Zealand and stay once they're here because the lifestyle is so incredible. But there are a lot of Kiwi expats out there who don't want to come back because they don't see the big companies so they don't see that there is opportunity. Perhaps if they saw some of what the innovative small companies were doing, they would see that there is life outside those big companies. So maybe it's showcasing some of that fun and challenging stuff that people would come back for.

There's been a lot of rhetoric from the government that we need to put more people into science and fewer people into law and accounting. A lot of rhetoric and not much more: ever since I

was a PhD student, I have been hearing statements about science being important for the economy, yet I don't see the pathway for young scientists getting any better. A lot of our highly talented kids drive into law and medicine, because that's what's seen as a very structured career, but also where the elite go. I think the government needs to put more money in at schools to be able to say:

... we need to be shouting from the rooftops about what we do.

'Well, there are actually career opportunities outside of those core law and accounting degrees,' and do more to support their careers post-graduation. I also believe agriculture and agribusiness, which are what still underpins our country's economy, has an unexciting image in schools. The reality is, we are producing some of the best food for some incredibly new and dynamic markets – what could be more exciting than that?

6. What does New Zealand need to do in order to attract, keep and grow talent?

On a global scale, I think showcasing more of those companies doing fun and exciting things and getting in touch with expat-type networks and let them in on what's happening. I know NZTE [New Zealand Trade and Enterprise] is doing the NZ Inc branding. We were discussing this in our business and asking, what are we as New Zealanders? What makes us special? Is it just the clean and green? What we came up with was actually, where we stand out is that slight quirkiness. For me, quirky means innovative as well, and willing to think outside the box. As a small country, we've got a reputation of not just following the pack. I think it's fundamentally in our makeup that we won't always look at something and do what everyone else is doing. It's the fun factor with that whole

everything we do in our lifestyle – the way we do our business, we also like to have fun. So we need to showcase ourselves as thinking outside the box and being an exciting place to grow new business. With global connectivity the way it is there are some great opportunities that we didn't previously have because of our isolation.

To grow our own talent, we have to get them right at that undergraduate level. We'd like to see universities do more to link with business, and maybe the universities could make contact with industry more accessible, because it is quite hard for a 20-year-old to rock up to someone at a lab and say, 'Can I have fifteen minutes of your time?' I'd like to see more in schools to encourage pupils to think beyond medicine, law and accounting, and a much wider recognition by the country that agribusiness has to attract innovative, talented people.

7. Any final thoughts for young people?

Lots, but it doesn't mean you get listened to when I talk to my own kids. If I were talking to someone around that age of 14–15 that was interested in my sort of space, I would really, really strongly suggest that they learn Mandarin, or another Asian language. Other advice would be not to get strung up on having to have a job at the end of your degree. Really try and do things that interest you that are also quite applied. Most of our young people, the jobs they'll be doing, we don't even know about right now. So really having the belief in yourself, that willingness to learn is important. Once you've done that degree, the learning doesn't stop there. You'll be learning the rest of your life to keep up with things.

Interviewed by Darren Zhang at AbacusBio in Dunedin, on 4 June 2013. Photograph provided by Anna Campbell.