



CATHERINE WALKER

Catherine is the community manager in charge of social media at Xero, a global online accounting software company. Her background in analysis and user documentation has contributed to her focus on customer experience. Joining Xero in the early days, Catherine is now based in New York, helping take a New Zealand company to the United States.

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

People who are good at what they do and have a proven track record. It doesn't necessarily mean university education; if you are good at what you do and you can prove yourself then I'd say for me that's what it is. In my line of work you often hear people say 'We need to get this social media guru in to tell us how to do this,' and I wonder if we're at the guru stage yet for something that's still quite new and evolving every day, not necessarily scientific and has a huge touchy-feely element to it. Sure, there are people who do it well and have lots of experiences that you can learn from, so being able to prove that and show what you've done is talent, not just a fancy title.

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

I think we do have gaps across the board; it's most acute with technology. New Zealand is innovative yes, but also behind on some things: fibre,

latest phones and gadgets and that's probably due to the demand factor not being that high with a smaller population and it's that same small size that vies for a limited talent pool.

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We're trying to build this huge global tech business and the company [Xero] is at a point where we're struggling to grow. We have amazing people across the board, not only developers but also marketing, support, finance, ideas people but there is only a limited pool in New Zealand. And as we go global we can't necessarily keep hiring from just New Zealand— I'm seeing first hand in the US that doing business here is different so you need that local knowledge.

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

A few different things, the obvious like safe, great work environments but also offering amazing work and the culture – that will come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and is definitely something we're tasking ourselves to retain even as we grow and go global. And good pay – that's an interesting one for me, having been employed in New Zealand and now living and working here in New York City and being able to compare pay and cost of living. Cost of living overseas is pretty high, definitely somewhere like New York, but from my own personal experience the cost of living in New Zealand is high too; I mean accommodation is okay but some other stuff like domestic travel, food, dining out, flowers, cabs, drycleaning, internet seems much more expensive – it's just a population thing I guess.

Another thing for companies to attract talent would be good brand perception. Does anybody really know how Apple or Facebook works? Do people, unless they know someone who works there, really know what it's like to work there? Yet everybody seems to want to. Is it

that great inside or is it just such a great brand that is so global that everybody is drawn to it? It's starting to happen to Xero in New Zealand; I don't think it's too arrogant to say that people look at Xero and think, 'Hey, I'd like to work there.'

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

In a really broad generic sense I think groups of like-minded companies clustered together is cool, brings a drive and camaraderie; it's a really good way to connect with peers and learn from their experience in an advisory way. I think New York has quite a vibrant tech start-up community and anyone could find a niche hub but again population comes into it – you can go to some tech meet-up or something here or there'll be some weird mobile start-up platform and everybody will be there – no way there's this scale in New Zealand but there's plenty of innovation and initiatives like WDCNZ (web developer conference) so it'll happen.

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

To attract and grow talent, amazing, interesting work is appealing. Something like Weta – I don't even know what they do there, it's this black box, it's very mysterious – it's interesting on a global scale because the work is fascinating. If you can attract people to your amazing work and they understand and want to be part of your vision and story then they'll come. And of course a lot are drawn to the lifestyle and country as a whole.

We've got a lot of folks from other countries at Xero and we've hired people in a couple of bigger roles recently from

overseas who are coming to work for Xero because they're really interested in where we've come from and what we're looking to achieve – so the attraction is there.

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

I think certainly the lifestyle of New Zealand is one to promote and that's what we do a lot but for me it's not just about the 'clean, green' aspect of New Zealand, it's about everything else about living and doing and starting business. From an immigration standpoint or a starting-business standpoint in

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New Zealand personal tax and business tax are actually a lot easier; you have no idea how easy it is in relation to the amount of tax you pay here and the number of times you have to pay it. The New Zealand government is doing a lot of stuff right – everything is online, you don't have to fill out tax forms any more if you're employed. That's a good way to attract people even if someone doesn't want to go hiking every weekend.

I guess a barrier to that is that as more people, more talent goes to New Zealand and more businesses are successful you are just competing for those same limited resources. People say to me a lot, I'm atypical because I've chosen to live overseas. I'm proud to be a Kiwi but it doesn't define me – I love a city life

and have wanted to live in New York forever, there's a magnetic pull for me. I love living in an apartment, in a bustling big city, looking up a lot, getting coffee at 5pm, have Amazon delivered the next day or having the groceries arrive at 9pm. But what I do miss about New Zealand is how much easier some of the fundamentals are – driver licence, post office, medical services. For me, without putting New Zealand down, I do find it quite small and claustrophobic. I don't want to live somewhere that's 9 to 5, and some aspects of New Zealand are very 9 to 5.

7. Any final thoughts for young people?

I think it's still important for young New Zealanders to travel and to realise there is a big world out there. Not that what they'll find out there is better, but it just makes you appreciate more about what you've got in New Zealand, and that any opportunity you can find overseas you could make that for yourself in New Zealand with the right drive and passion. Be proud to be a New Zealander but for increasing international relations and growing global companies, knowing how the rest of the world works is important. Not everybody can travel, obviously, but if you have an opportunity to find out what's going on in the rest of the world, do that.

Interviewed by Charlotte Greenfield via Skype, on 11 July 2013. Photograph provided by Catherine Walker.