



DAVE DARLING

Dave is the Chief Executive of Pacific Edge Ltd, a Dunedin-based biomedical company specialising in the discovery and commercialisation of technologies and products that assist in the detection and management of cancers. Dave combines being a scientist and science manager with experience of building and growing entrepreneurial companies to commercialise technology.

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

Talent is an aggregation of personal skills and capabilities that an individual has and has enhanced and developed during their professional or commercial career. So when someone has talent, they have both the interpersonal skills and the commercial, technical or specific skills that give them the all round capability. In some ways the definition is synonymous with capability. It's one thing to have talent but the overarching requirement is the cultural fit in your team or organisation.

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

There are always talent gaps, especially in organisations that are starting up or growing. Recruiting talent in the US for our new enterprise is a lot more straightforward than recruiting talent in a small country like New Zealand. We certainly have talent here but often you have to grow your own capability base – so you do have to look ahead and

we plan ahead to grow our people into a specific space.

At the same time, you have to bring in other people from other experiential backgrounds to broaden your talent or capability pool. We have roles that we fill progressively when we find people, or they appear, with the right set of talent and skills. You may not be quite ready for them but you recognise that these people aren't available all the time, so you've got to grab them while they're there.

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

You've got to involve people broadly across your business and building the right sort of culture is critically important. There have to be growth opportunities for these talented people. Talented people often move on in order to grow, so you've got to ensure you're offering them something that fits their needs as they grow and develop. Understanding what their needs are is very important to keeping that talent and getting it developed and nurtured in your own organisation. Your company

can get over-exposed when you have a capability nested in a few people and they want to move-on.

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

I'm not sure that there is such a thing as talent hubs, but there are geographical areas of specialisation that are in-effect hubs. A good example would be the Research Triangle Park (RTP) in North Carolina. The RTP is a biotechnology hub that employs in excess of 100,000 people. So I guess you could say talent congregates there? You attract a critical mass of people with capability, and in that critical mass of capability there will be a mass of talent. That's a great opportunity to recruit if you're in those epicentres because the co-location there means your recruitment is a little more straightforward. The United States does this well and New Zealand could take a leaf from their book.

We are strategically located in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Part of that decision was to do with its proximity to the key customers. Our concern was, whilst it was strategically optimal for access to our

customers logistics, we thought that maybe we might have trouble recruiting talent to a more 'rural' area than say downtown San Francisco, New York, Boston or some of the other major metro centres. But it hasn't turned out to be the case. There is a significant pool of talent, and because we're right alongside the Penn State Medical Research Hospital it provides an actual catalyst for attracting them. We're only an hour away from several major hubs, so people can commute quite easily and that's exactly what happens in our recruitment process in the United States.

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

I think New Zealand is the recipient of capability and talent that has been honed by experience overseas, simply because people come home for the lifestyle and family. They have children and they want to come to a great environment to educate their children. They've been away growing their capability, making some good money and they want to come back to New Zealand to contribute and raise their family. We have recruited people out of the United Kingdom who are looking for an opportunity to grow and they see an opportunity to build their experience in New Zealand. New Zealand's clean, green, outdoors doesn't necessarily appeal to everyone, however for some it is a major part of their life and we are the recipients.

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

I believe that we need to continue to grow-out a greater number of companies that New Zealand can leverage into an export base. If you want

enough biotech companies, you've got to have enough attractive business incentives to drive these companies to scale. So that means New Zealand should build the ecosystem that would warrant those companies to be/grow and stay in New Zealand. It's a little bit of a catch-22: you can't get the talent unless you've got the businesses; you can't get the businesses unless you've got the talented people and the right business environment.

Firstly, it's probably about growing businesses. How do you do that? You've got to make the operating environment exciting to be in. Sometimes

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that's through a fiscal need, taxation and R&D grants. Look at how small states in the United States attract business to grow and build those epicentres of talent, then look to New Zealand and say, 'How do we build a similar ecosystem?' I'm sure that we all recognise that to grow our economy we need to develop smart manufacturing businesses.

One of the big attracting elements that we found when we went to Hershey, Pennsylvania is that the state provided an incentive package that contributed to the build-out and a fit-out of our

customised laboratory and an incentive on the number of people that we employ. There are lots of these successful models internationally that New Zealand can emulate.

7. Any final thoughts for young people?

It really comes down to the individual, however an individual needs to build their CV and to build a bunch of cross-functional skill sets. Being employed by a big corporate can provide many of these opportunities. For some the best route may be to go offshore and learn how other businesses operate, particularly in areas where there is already a pool of expertise, so that you can grow your own capability and then take that to wherever you want to live. Some of the internships that the government sponsors and funds are great tools for individuals to get started and I would recommend them to all.

It's harder for young people today to get the requisite experience. A tertiary qualification just gets you in the door. When recruiting, I go straight to the back of their CV and look at what the individual has done when they're 16 or 17 in their holidays. How driven were they to gain skills, experience and money? If they've shown a personal proclivity to getting out there and doing it, I'll hire that person over everybody else.

Interviewed by Darren Zhang via Skype, on 18 June 2013. Photograph provided by Pacific Edge Ltd.