



FRANCES VALINTINE

At the time of this interview Frances was Chief executive of the Media Design School in Auckland. Beginning her career in Europe, she has extensive experience in the creative and technology sectors. She has recently opened The Mind Lab, a specialist education facility designed to engage children aged 4–14 years in active learning using 21st century technologies in digital and creative fields.

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

Talent to me is somebody who can see where the future is and what opportunities there are. I see the greatest talent in the people who are not necessarily looking at what they can see and experience right now, but they're the ones saying 'Where do I fit in the world in a few years?' Talent is about being adaptable. Adaptability is a little bit of intuitiveness, and the hard skills to achieve what they are looking for.

Talent is inquisitive. Inquisitiveness is to be human. Inspired talent is curious and inquisitive. These are the people who find exciting opportunities and make things happen. It comes back to people every time. We need to nurture odd people, people who don't necessarily conform to a certain way and people who bring different influences and who think differently.

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

There are numerous talent gaps – I think students have an entirely different frame of what they want in the world – the gap we have is almost an age gap between what students know and what somebody 30 to 40+ knows. Young people who are coming through see things very differently. If I could rewrite the school curriculum, I would say let's forget French and let's make sure that programming is a core language, because it is the language of the 21st century. I think that we've all heard about science and technology and not enough young people undertaking them, but we need to frame them in a way that is relevant to the now.

The other area of talent is identifying that, as adults, we don't know everything anymore. I look to my staff who are young, saying 'Tell me what I don't know,' and that's actually quite a challenge to do because pride gets

in the way. Talent to me is recognising the world has shifted and actually saying, 'Let's throw out what no longer applies and let's bring through what does apply, and let's bring in what we now need to know.'

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

The demands that are put on an employee now are greater because they've got longer working hours, so employers need to understand that flexibility to still have a lifestyle balance is really important. Sometimes

that's not feasible, but people need to feel valued as an individual. So you have to look at the individual situation. What's their family situation? What's their financial situation? What's driven them or made them decide to come to New Zealand, for example.

The larger an organisation becomes, the trickier it gets to retain those individual relationships with your staff. If staff feel that they are still an individual, it gives them so much more power. Keeping people feeling valuable or excited about what they do because they are valued is basic human nature to me.

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

So the Media Design School is a talent hub. We have 700 people who are creative and technology focused in one building. Here, you then get this interesting collaborative and converging culture that comes with high level energy. You have collaboration because you've got people of like-minded interests. But you also have this convergence between say someone who is a 3D animator and someone who is a game artist using similar type tools, but what they're producing is quite different. You put those two together and then suddenly you have magic because the convergent ideas suddenly come together.

The idea of community is powerful, it really is, which is why social media has such a great impact. People can actually find those people who they can feed with their own excitement and energy, and then bring in and draw others. A good example of a physical community is the Innovation Precinct that is opening in Auckland. The idea of putting like-minded companies who are innovative, technology-focused, export-driven, together it means that some of the barriers of physicality diminish.

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

We definitely do need to attract more talented staff into New Zealand, there's no question. We are still finding it very hard to find the right people. What we do need to do is look at where those opportunities are to make sure we can continue to develop people in New Zealand who can keep sustaining the workforce. But to supplement it, we need international staff coming through, and the other great thing about bringing international staff in is that they bring in that diversity and that worldly experience.

To keep and attract dynamic young people from overseas, I would move away from this idea of promoting lifestyle only. I know Mayor Brown's got this vision of promoting Auckland as the world's most liveable city. Liveable is great. People want to be in a place they feel safe, secure and loved. But they also want to feel inspired, and we need to make sure that we are constantly looking externally at global infrastructural progressions to see where we can strengthen our possibilities.

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

It comes back to making sure people can see the opportunity to start up companies here and actually get people curious and excited. We can do so much here in terms of testing. It's a great test environment. Come up with an invention, idea, software, whatever it might be, and actually take it, test it, and then export it. International staff coming here need to see that we really are encouraging start-ups, encouraging people to come in and contribute at that very high level.

We need to continue sending people away. I love the OE model. Whatever age they do it, it is an important part of the New Zealand psyche to get global experience and get people exposed to resources that they'll never get here. The skills they learn are applicable in so many areas so we should encourage them into incubators and into working with young people, making sure that they can see that they can fit in and contribute that knowledge back. I think that a programme around those returning expats would be amazing if we could bring them in with young people. For every student we have here, almost all of them will tell you the story that they've got into this because of somebody who has either mentored them or inspired them.

7. Any final thoughts for young people?

At every graduation, I say pretty much the same thing. Be curious, make good friends and don't burn bridges. They're basic human rules. If people like to do business with you, they'll do business with you. If you stay curious, you're always going to be looking for a better way of doing things. And it means you're going to continue to be inspired.

The model of the power boss is long gone. This generation has worked it out because they're much more real about things. It's okay to put your hand up and say I actually don't know how to do that. It's okay to fail fast and fix faster.

Interviewed by Darren Zhang at the Media Design School in Auckland, on 17 May 2013. Photograph provided by The Mind Lab.