



KAILA COLBIN

Kaila is the founder and chief executive of a number of initiatives, including Missing Link and Ministry of Awesome in Christchurch. A native New Yorker, she has been an entrepreneur since she was 22 and is fluent in four languages. Kaila loves to see ideas turned into action.

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

Talent is the expression of our individual gifts. Everyone has gifts, but some people are not in a position to pursue theirs. When we look at somebody talented, we see someone who is expressing themselves at the highest level of what is possible, whether in business, art, sports, innovation. The further we are developed in understanding what our gifts are and in cultivating them, the more talented we will appear to the outside world.

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

When I think about the rebuild in Christchurch, there are two dominant conversations happening right now: one is at government level, that is \$40 billion, confidence for investors, certainty for developers, large-scale infrastructure, etc. Then the second is the kind of bottom-up conversation that Gap Filler, Greening the Rubble, Life in Vacant Spaces and others are having:

vibrant city, citizen engagement, social innovation. The one conversation that we're all having is 'successful city', but we're coming at that from two completely different angles.

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The need to bridge those conversations is the most essential talent gap that we have right now. We need all those large-scale investments and infrastructure, but without the vibrancy animating

them, they are only two legs and a torso and a head bolted together. We need those people who can sit in both camps translating the value of social innovation and grassroots creativity into language that the government can understand so we can take an approach that is integrative rather than linear and siloed.

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

Talented people need a certain amount of autonomy as they are self-actualised. They want to be in a place that will support, recognise, and allow them to express that. If people are amazing coders, they want to go to places like Google that's going to make them feel like gurus and rock stars of what they do. Because we have all the tools we need to do anything we want from anywhere, talented people have absolutely no reason to go where they aren't given the meaning that we all need to thrive on.

What can organisations do? Definitely recognising this. Interviews are much more of a two-way conversation now where it's more like, 'I'm interviewing

you but you're interviewing me to see if this opportunity is right for you.' It requires almost a humility on the part of the organisations to say, 'You know what, we need to make this opportunity so compelling for people that they feel like they can offer something here that they could not offer anywhere else.'

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

When I think about talent hubs, two main things have come up over again, and that's density and diversity. Innovation happens when ideas have sex, and that only happens if you put a whole bunch of different disciplines in the same place and let them bump into each other.

An area that does talent hubs successfully is San Francisco. When you go to San Francisco and you walk around, it is funky. There are a million things happening – cafes, clothing stores, nightclubs, restaurants, arts, people naked in the streets. People will look at a talent hub and say it's a real mecca for X, like San Francisco is a mecca for tech start-ups. But then you dig in and there's all this other stuff going on. You can't take X in isolation and only feed that – that's my big concern about what is happening here. We don't have density because we've all been scattered, and if we come back together in siloed chunks, we lose the diversity essential to cultivating talent.

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

We have a lot of insanely talented people in New Zealand, but I think we struggle to understand the factors that keep them here and help them thrive. And a big part of that is a linear

approach to the kind of talent we want. We go, 'We're going to be a mecca for IT talent, we're going to bring all the IT talent here.' IT people go do their IT but then they're DJs or quilters or marathoners or whatever. When you go to a place that is uni-functional, it becomes soulless, like Canberra. So this idea that it's got to be agribusiness or whatever is, I think, a broken, outdated idea. We need to acknowledge that people have multifaceted lives, and certainly talented people are less tolerant of restrictions on their ability to explore and be inspired in all facets of their lives. We need to create the conditions for a million flowers to bloom, then we see which ones become the next Tait or Weta by bringing people together, allowing them to bump into

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each other, crossing silos and breaking them down, highlighting things, giving people more opportunities to connect, celebrating successes and more attempts at success.

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

Christchurch definitely has a tonne of talented, creative people trying to do amazing things but have a number of barriers in their way. One of the key roles of government is to reduce barriers to super-motivated people contributing to the life of the city. Subsidies are a bad word in government, but we have to recognise that our free market

has been skewed by the earthquakes. Normally, cities have older buildings that require a lower economic return for their owners. Now we don't have that inventory available at the lower end of the market and so you lose all of your start-ups, SMEs, creatives, your lower end amenity that is essential for a vibrant central city. We still do want that vibrancy, and that is by creating space at the lower end of the market, and subsidies are one way to achieve that.

7. Any final thoughts for young people?

When I was younger, I put people who were significantly older than me on a pedestal and thought, 'Oh these people, they really know the answers.' What I have realised is that nobody knows. Everyone is making it up all the time. The people you think are the smartest people in the room just have more experience making it up and more tolerance for making decisions with imperfect and uncertain information. That is something that you only get by practice. The sooner you recognise that, the more powerful you can be. There are a million ways to get from birth to death, and every one works. So whatever idea you have about life, it's all just made up. You can choose to accept that or not accept it.

Interviewed by Charlotte Greenfield at the Tradestaff offices in Christchurch, on 3 July 2013. Photograph provided by Kaila Colbin.