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## RAF MANJI

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*Before moving to New Zealand in 2002, Raf worked as an investment banker in London. Today Raf is the founder of the Sustento Institute, a Christchurch-based policy development organisation, and Chair of the Volunteer Army Foundation. He is also currently working on a proposal for an open visa, to encourage young talented people to work in New Zealand. Most recently, Raf has become an elected member of Christchurch City Council.*

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

It is about having purpose and drive and not just specific skills, but an ability to do something. When you see a young person, you think 'They're talented'; they just give you this feeling that they're quite capable, and you can direct them in lots of different ways. It's almost like being an 'able person'; it's not specifically around skills but more around attitude.

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

You could say the whole organisation is a talent gap in itself and that's the whole point. We just make stuff up as we go along so we are constantly surrounded by talented people, and at the same time we are trying to build a traditional organisation so that we can get funding. Before this year, when we were still in the earthquake zone, it was easy to get funds which meant we could have a very unstructured organisation that worked very well. That's what I see

the future of the organisation being, but our traditional funding structures don't allow for that kind of flexibility.

In terms of New Zealand as a whole, I think our gaps are in our thinking; you could argue that we lack diversity, and I think a lot of people who come here as

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either expats or returning Kiwis find it very difficult to fit into general business as we have quite an insular way of thinking. We have to move beyond that if we want to create something special.

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

It is a completely different environment these days, the job world is very

different. When you're dealing with someone in their early twenties you need to sell the idea that there's going to be something creative, innovative that will stretch them and empower them.

Empowerment is very important. The way I tend to manage people in that age group is to give them their head a lot, which means they can make lots of mistakes, but actually to just say 'That's fine,' and then let them get on with it and actually be involved in designing the outcomes themselves. This is a social change; they need to feel like they're wanted, that they have some kind of agency, that they're empowered, that they're important.

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

The foundation of the innovative and creative economy is actually just having places where people can get together. In London a group formed in, I think, 1999/2000, called World Voices, put on this big conference. It was probably one of the first big sustainable living conferences which encompassed all aspects – economy, environment, social, etc.

People were shifting to a more purpose-driven life, something that is becoming standard now. I think ‘The Hub’ concept came out of that work, and it was one of the first to do that. They’re all over the place now – in any big city you can just rock up and you’ll find some place that has weekly meetings that you can go and join in.

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

I think we’re doing reasonably well, if you think what we’ve done in Christchurch since the earthquake. I think Christchurch will become the centre for innovation and creativity. Mainly because we’ve got the scale here so we can build anything new, we can actually attract a lot of overseas business here, and that’s important for the national economy as well.

The ability to commercialise is very poor, mainly because we just don’t have those drives, it’s just not part of the Kiwi culture. But I think we can fix that by attracting international talent here and allowing some of that to drive our changes. We are very small-scale at the moment, but we have got great opportunities. If you think where we’re going, New Zealand has a lot of assets that other countries don’t have, and it’s making sure that we leverage those assets and do it properly.

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

It’s like anything, your biggest problem can become your biggest advantage and vice versa. If you think of the global financial crisis, we haven’t experienced the worst effects. We’re small, we’re plain vanilla, we didn’t have the same complex financial system that

they did overseas. So we actually have the chance to sit back and look around and say okay, we can actually remake this in a different way.

We want smart young people because we are building for the future here. This is what I’ve been saying to the immigration people [Immigration NZ]. They’ve got the Silver Fern Visa, which is not targeted well, they’ve got 45–50 thousand working-holiday visas; there is room to cut and say, right, bring in a thousand super-smart people in their early 20s and say they can stay until they’re 30. I’ll give you an example from volunteer army last year: we had a girl from Kenya who had a Masters in disaster risk management, very talented,

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but she could only be here on a specific visa – so she was working as a chef from 5am to 1pm and then worked for us in the afternoon. Now that’s stupid! So in a way, that’s where the open visa idea came from.

Immigration policy is the key; we cannot build the scale ourselves because we don’t have enough people. It’s not about growing our population, it’s about changing our population structure. It is an opportunity to rebalance the demographic – shifting the age level to bring in young smart people – we’re going to have enough old people as it is. We’ve got that conveyor-belt thing – our smart kids will go overseas,

but we’re bringing smart people in all the time – we want that. From a trade perspective, we can create these global networks, channels everywhere; you have landing pads, your hubs.

We have the opportunity to be dynamic, whereas a lot of other countries have huge problems, huge structural problems that are not going to go away. We can take a completely different approach. For us, it’s important that we start to create those dynamic, innovative industries – agritech, health tech, general IT, high-tech manufacturing, high-tech building. We already have a solid base. We need to bring in smart people to develop these businesses further, and then we need to be able to upskill the current younger generation.

## 7. Any final thoughts for young people?

I’d say, do what you love absolutely. If you don’t know what you love, try a lot of different stuff and don’t be afraid to try stuff that doesn’t work. Some people know what they want to do, a lot of people don’t, so try different things. The fact that your CV might have four different things in a year doesn’t matter at all, and will in fact be a good thing – it will show you tried lots of stuff. I’d say, take chances, when you’re young it doesn’t matter. Hopefully through those three things – doing what you love, trying stuff, taking risks – you’ll find your purpose, and that’s what should drive you through your life. I mean, I think ultimately with trying, it will raise your awareness of a more purpose-filled life; you’re doing what matters to you, that’s really key.

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