



ROGER DENNIS

Roger is a consultant in foresight, innovation and large-scale change, supporting government bodies and companies across Asia, Europe and Australasia. He is currently leading the Christchurch initiative called Sensing Cities, which involves the conjunction of commercial sensor technology and real-time data to create a faster-responding city.

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

Smart people who can live anywhere in the world and know the conditions by which they want to be employed.

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

I'll give you some context. I don't know how much you know about Sensing City. I look at where trends are going around the world and what's happening in the technology space right now. I think the opportunity for New Zealand is to turn Christchurch into the only place where you understand how cities work in real time by putting sensors into the rebuild infrastructure. They would measure everything from traffic, to CO₂, to water flow or anything else. Now it turns out that is a world first, no one internationally can do that. Already, even though we're not fully funded, people ring up asking for jobs.

So when you ask what is missing from the talent that I would need to make

this work, it's a whole emerging breed of expertise around understanding big data, big cities, and the intersection of those two and how to get real-time information back out to people who need it. You go to London or New York or Tokyo or anywhere in the world, that expertise is so thin on the ground that it's a talent war.

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

By doing things that nobody else in the world is doing. By not pushing the 'We're New Zealand, aren't we great?' argument.

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

London is just an extraordinary place. It's important to remember that from my point of view there are only a few places in the world like it – London is not the UK, New York is not America, San Francisco's not America, Tokyo's not really Japan, so I don't think it's countries as hubs – unless it's Singapore

– it's cities. So I now try and get in at least one trip a year where I will go to San Francisco, New York, London and Singapore. I know that I can fill every hour of every day meeting interesting people overseas simply because they're magnets for talent.

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

I think your best indicator of this is to go to Miramar Peninsula. What's interesting about that is that most of what Peter and Richard do is project-based and those projects attract hugely talented gypsies who just work on the project and then go. What you need to do is figure out what it is that converts some of those gypsies and why it is they might want to stay. I'm guessing that in Miramar it's that combination of extraordinary lifestyle plus extraordinary opportunity.

You can try and look for that across the rest of the country and it doesn't add up – it's just lifestyle. So if you're a smart talented person the lifestyle is much better in San Francisco and New

York. So it needs a combination of the lifestyle plus the serious magnet – like Miramar – to make it work. There's only one of those in New Zealand right now and that's what they've built up from scratch. There's nothing else really.

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

Political willpower. We have a three-year cycle, which means politicians are risk-averse. So, long-term thinking and not being so averse to risks.

At the moment the things New Zealand does that are non-replicable on a global scale are tourism, which is low-margin and can't scale, and dairy, which is a price-taker not a price-maker, so if we build the whole country's backbone on those two industries, we're pretty screwed.

What you normally find in the New Zealand tech industry is that people talk about it being the weightless economy – the stuff we can develop is highly exportable intellectual property, which is high margin. The difficulty is that the really good ones get bought, get taken offshore, or everything gets vacuumed out. The big thing with Sensing City is how do you reverse that? I think if you embed in the technology in the fabric of the city, what it means is corporates come here and smart talent comes here rather than the reverse.

We need to leverage our attributes very carefully – look at Project Loon. This is a case study in itself. Google X is the hardware division of Google. Their first project was the driverless car, their next project was Google Glass. Those are the only two projects that they've ever publicly talked about. Their third project, which is called Loon, was released in Christchurch about four weeks ago. Loon is a project to release

custom-made balloons into the stratosphere to act basically as internet service providers. It can relay internet from a certain point through it to a certain point to give you cheap internet access in a way that satellites can't do. It's for Africa and places in the world where you can't get internet access so you can do it very, very cheaply.

Now the reason Google X launched in New Zealand was a combination of things. What's interesting is that if Google X went to Sydney, London, San Francisco, New York, Singapore

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and said, 'We want to launch our next Google X project somewhere in the world, we want you to pay for it,' cities would start a bidding war, such is the kudos of getting Google X involved.

They came to New Zealand for three reasons. First, when you go through Customs here, Customs start off with the belief that what you write on your manifest is what's in the crate, so it's friendly. Secondly, when you launch a balloon from the New Zealand stratosphere, the weather pattern is such that it floats through to two other countries before it comes back, so it's goes

New Zealand, Chile, Australia. If you launched from Singapore, London, or San Francisco, you go through about ten different jurisdictions and it will be a complete nightmare to get air traffic control clearance. And thirdly, they like kiwis. Our isolation in this example actually leads to something, which is a benefit.

They must have dropped over \$10 million into the economy. They flew at least twenty engineers out here, they had helicopter crews, supply chains, they've got a warehouse, just unbelievable resources are thrown at them and they chose Christchurch to launch. That's an interesting example because if potentially they set up base here, we're a magnet for talent because Google X is here and they have literally some of the smartest people in the world working for them. So you have the Mensa Club descending on Christchurch, and if you can persuade them to stay, that gets really interesting for New Zealand's economy. A lot of us are trying, because to have their base here would be fabulous.

7. Any final thoughts for young people?

Travel, but then come back to New Zealand and because it's really easy to make things happen here. We are a small country and small countries have advantages around agility and the ability to make things happen, but until you travel you really don't appreciate how good New Zealand is in certain respects and what you can make happen.

Interviewed by Charlotte Greenfield at the Epic Building in Christchurch, on 3 July 2013. Photograph provided by the McGuinness Institute.