



## MIKE 'MOD' O'DONNELL

MOD is Chief Operating Officer at Trade Me, New Zealand's largest online marketplace. Established 14 years ago, Trade Me now has over 3 million registered users and is listed on the New Zealand and Australian stock exchanges. MOD is a professional director and has experience in media, marketing and investment, and has a love of motorcycles. He is known for creating dynamic work environments.

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

I guess I'd start out with somebody who can add value to the company – economic value and growth value and cultural value. The way that I typically define talent is the right balance between competence and confidence. For me, certainly wearing this hat here, talent is – apart from being smart – people who are essentially optimistic and glass-half-full people. That underlying optimism in creating a net surplus of energy rather than a net sucking up of energy is important.

*... talent is the right balance between competence and confidence.*

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

We don't really think about the next ten years. We've got no idea what might be happening in ten years' time. We find

it a stretch to think about five years so we think more about the next two or three years and there is a dearth overall of good developer talent in New Zealand – that is software developers and software engineers. There are truckloads of designers but there are very few user-interface and user-experience people. Having sales people who are able to understand a culture and understand the consumer centricity of our underlying business but also can do sales is a challenge as well. We're always looking for all these people and is there a talent gap? Well, Wellington is Cyber-Welly. It's the internet capital of New Zealand so there's intense competition for those people, both between two or three big players and a truckload of smaller development shops.

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

Firstly, we do no brand advertising, so you won't see a Trade Me advertisement, but despite that, we have quite a strong brand and keep our brand healthy and vibrant and Kiwi-fied and overall positive. That's a pretty important thing to do in terms of attracting talent. So that first association with Trade Me is 'Oh that sounds like fun' – that's important

Secondly, we have a very non-hierarchical office environment. Nobody has an office and people move around a lot. So I'm about to move desks again and that will be the fourth time in a year. On the Trade Me website, people trade on their brands and their feedback record. Internally at Trade Me people trade on their brands as well. People whose brands are around being good implementers and giving a damn and reaching out and supporting their colleagues go a hell of a long way. One of the problems we have periodically is that we'll hire someone who's come from a more hierarchical corporate environment and they will mix up a person's position on

an HR gantt chart with their standing in the company.

In terms of retaining people, we try to do right by our staff, giving them the freedom to do their jobs and satisfaction from 'getting shit done'. We also do a number of things that are designed to make Trade Me a good place to continue to want to hang out and some of those are at the fluffier end. So we have a keg on Friday night and we have free lunch on Wednesday and again the motivator for that is not 'hey there's free food' but that on Wednesday from 12pm until 1pm the whole company comes together and has some pizza or some Indian food or what have you and talks.

We also, when it's possible, encourage people to get involved in things outside Trade Me. So we have a lot of people here who will run their own websites and may be setting up entrepreneurial businesses in their own right. Those people will be happier being able to do that and give us better bang for our buck. You do need to have people who can cope with that so if you have somebody who just comes in at 9.30 in the morning and they look absolutely exhausted because they've been up coding until three o'clock in the morning and they're asleep at their desk and bad tempered, then that's not cool.

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

I think Wellington's a great talent hub. Wellington is probably the high point of e-commerce and web business talent in New Zealand. It's also an incredibly easy place to do business because it's physically compact and it's well networked and government are here, but also a lot of interesting businesses are here. I think as the rebuild in Christchurch happens, Christchurch will be a great place to find talent. Broader than that, Melbourne has got

a lot of the constituents for being a hub for talent. Obviously, San Francisco. I think Austin, Texas is, I think Seattle has been, I'm not sure that it still is.

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

What I think is that for people in their late teens and twenties, in their eyes, New Zealand may not measure up for them, but as you get into your thirties and you're likely partnered up, you're starting to think about having kids and all the things about New Zealand being a great place to bring up kids, access to the outdoors, a relatively safe society. So I think all of those lifestyle, quality of life, trust and safety issues work very well for us.

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

An interesting question for me is who is responsible for attracting talent at a national level. So if you look in Wellington, there's a great initiative that's almost 12 months old called Destination Wellington and that's a joint venture between Positively Wellington, Tourism, Grow Wellington and the Wellington City Council. I think that's tremendously exciting for Wellington as a region and for that crossover between tourism, investment, business start-ups and particularly for those with a tech or web bent, I think that's great news. I think there's no national body for that. There's a great national body for

tourism, Tourism NZ, but for economic development, there isn't a national economic development with an aim especially on attracting talent to New Zealand, not one that I'm aware of anyway.

Another thing that I believe too is the amount that we pay for food and the amount that we pay for consumables is high on a global basis. I think that is a restrictor.

#### 7. Any final thoughts for young people?

Probably two things – the first is do the stuff you like. If you do what you like, you will invariably become good at it and if you become good at it then you work out a way of making money out of it.

The second thing is – dare to be entrepreneurial. I think Kiwis can be great entrepreneurs but often they go so far and then they don't go any further. I'm not sure that we tell enough entrepreneurial stories. I don't know if we tell stories about the

John Brittens or the Burt Monroes or the early days of the Fletcher Empire or what Jeremy's done with Icebreaker or what the guys did with 42 Below. There's a ton of stories there and I'm not sure we tell them a lot. Because you tell those stories and people go 'Shit, that's really interesting, I could do that with the stuff I'm interested in.'

*Dare to be entrepreneurial. I think Kiwis can be great entrepreneurs but often they go so far and then they don't go any further.*

Interviewed by Charlotte Greenfield at Trade Me in Wellington, on 1 May 2013. Photograph provided by the McGuinness Institute.