



RACHEL CARRELL

Rachel is the chief executive at DrThom, the world's largest online doctor service, located in the United Kingdom. Originally from Invercargill, she completed a doctorate at Oxford then worked in various sectors across the world before taking up her role at DrThom. Rachel offers the perspective of someone who chooses to take opportunities as they arise.

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

To me, talent is about aptitude rather than skills. But in the context of this conversation I think we probably mean the actual ability to do stuff, not just the potential ability to do stuff.

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

In my organisation there are tons of them. I run a really fast-growing organisation, and we have lots of vacancies. The biggest talent gap I would say across the board is analytical ability. By that I mean everything from facility with numbers – a raw quantitative orientation and aptitude – to a curiosity about analysis.

It's about making your business continuously improve. We employ a lot of customer service people who talk to customers all day, so they've got to be nice people to talk to and all that. But when something's gone wrong I want someone who can also say, 'Why did

that go wrong?' and, 'I won't just fix it this time, I'll fix it for all time. I'll have a think about how widespread the problem is and attack it in a really analytical way.' I would say we need that talent at every level of the company.

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What else? It's hard to find e-commerce people. It's hard to find IT people. It's an international shortage in both cases. I spend a lot of my time on hiring and recruiting and it's really difficult, and I pay head-hunters an awful lot to do it for me.

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

The most important thing – and it's much easier said than done – is a really clear vision, and clear roles. Making sure everyone knows what they contribute to that wider project and that every single role is valued.

You've got to make sure the package is right, in terms of competitive salary and all that, but far more important than that for me is selling the purpose of the organisation and really selling a vision. To give you an example, I never talk about sales. We say, 'Last week we helped 6000 patients.' We don't say, 'We sold 6000 products.' We're always trying to connect back to something that is very human, which is that everyone likes helping someone else. If you know that, whatever your job, at the end of the day you're part of this team that helped 6000 patients last week that's super-tangible. I think it's really easy to do that in healthcare but I think you can do it in any business.

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

In London, there's a roundabout called the Old Street Roundabout. It's in this horribly ugly and industrial area that has been turned into the heart of urban cool. So a couple of years ago, David Cameron the prime minister stood up somewhere and said, 'We're going to make this Silicon Roundabout'. At the time people were saying, 'Whatever, that sounds a bit stupid.' But it is incredible how it has actually happened.

Google have a big building there. There's a lot of really exciting entrepreneurial stuff around there. Globally important software start-ups already have come from there in a really short amount of time. There's all the kind of cool community stuff that you would expect to see in San Francisco and Silicon Valley. So I think you shouldn't underestimate the power of government to stick a flag in the sand, to recognise that something is already happening – there were a few companies already there, but not many – and really push it to the next level. That's all David Cameron did. They didn't compel anyone to move there, he just said 'This is going to happen' and it happened.

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

I would say in terms of nurturing talent, amazing. There's nothing wrong with the education system, for example. I mean I'm sure there's little things wrong with it, but I think we absolutely have an education system that can compete on the world scale.

In the UK the difference between good schools and bad schools is enormous, you cannot overstate it. So there's this

fight to the death among parents to get their kids into good schools and it's vicious. And while I'm sure we have good and bad schools in New Zealand, the distance between good and bad is not nearly so big. So you can go to your local school like I did, to a local state school, and you will generally probably be fine in New Zealand, so that's a huge advantage.

The other advantage is our culture of travel. The OE is just a phenomenal thing. It's such a Kiwi and Aussie source of strength. You get that kind of exposure to best practices and experience and bring it back to New Zealand.

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Attracting and retaining talent is a much more difficult challenge for New Zealand. I've personally thought about going home at times over the past ten years and it is extremely difficult. I consider I've got quite a big job and I would want to do a big job in New Zealand and I don't know where the big jobs are, I don't know how to find them.

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

Here are three really concrete ideas that would help me come back. One is tell me what the big jobs are, which means make it really obvious which

head-hunters I should call. The network KEA, that's really great. You could absolutely build on that. Maybe they have a jobs board, but make it a better one if they have one.

Number two is: tell me who else has come back and tell me good people who have come back. Because I don't want to be the only person coming back. Obviously lots of people come back, but I don't want to be the only person running an e-commerce business of this size trying to export. This comes back to the idea of a hub. There's a reason why people like to be in a hub – it's because they like to know they're not the only person trying to do the type of thing that they're doing.

Number three is the thing that frustrates me when I come home, and makes me think 'Oh my god could I actually ever work here?' It's the quality of internet provision in New Zealand. It's like a decade or something behind the UK, it's extraordinary. So when I think of running an e-commerce company, I think, is it even worth it? My husband went to the Democratic Republic of Congo about a week after we got back from New Zealand and he said the internet was better there than it was in New Zealand.

7. Any final thoughts for young people?

Work really hard. Take every opportunity. See everything as an opportunity. They're there and it's amazing that sometimes people don't jump at them. Every time someone asks you a hard question, every time you get given a hard project, all of it's an opportunity to either show what you can do or to learn. Either way it's an opportunity.

Interviewed by Charlotte Greenfield via Skype, on 19 June 2013. Photograph provided by Rachel Carrell.