



Alison Vickers and Rom Rudzki.



Ariunaa Mendtsoo.



Keke and YongLe Chong.

# The low-risk skills solution

Small business owners who offer work experience to newly-arrived skilled migrants say the benefits flow both ways. Julie Middleton reports.

Alison Vickers and husband Rom Rudzki came to New Zealand on holiday eight years ago and promptly fell in love with the country.

They had no trouble getting residence as skilled migrants – Rom is an unusual mix of academic, trainer and serial entrepreneur, with a doctorate and a long history in community work and economic development. Alison has an MBA and a marketing background, as both a practitioner and university lecturer.

But despite their experience and qualifications, says Alison, jobs were hard to land.

"We were at an advantage because we came from Britain, there were no language problems and our qualifications were recognised here. But we still struggled to get those first jobs."

Eventually they succeeded. Alison became Massey University's national marketing manager, and Rom joined its management school as a lecturer. They have now moved onto new projects, setting up the New Zealand School of Export in Palmerston North.

"Migrant work experience is a low-risk venture for small business without any of the contractual obligations that come with an employee."

The school, a charitable trust with three full and one part-time staff, plus teaching staff working on contract both here and overseas, is New Zealand's sole provider of the internationally-accredited Diploma of International Trade.

When the duo heard of the Manawatu Ethnic Council's new Migrant Internship Programme, launched last November, they wanted to get involved.

"We were very keen to offer other people an opportunity to have a New Zealand employer on their CV, and offer them a reference and introduce them to the Kiwi way of life," says Alison.

Their intern is Mongolia-born Ariunaa Mendtsoo. Fluent in English, Mongolian, Russian and German, Ariunaa came to New Zealand three years ago with her MBA-student husband and eight-year-old daughter. Ariunaa has a construction engineering degree and experience in translation and joint ventures.

Alison says the school is delighted with Ariunaa's voluntary contribution. Her engineering background has been evident in her methodical approach, willingness to ask questions and clarify, and use her initiative, says Alison.

"Ariunaa wants to fit in, she wants to learn and she wants to adapt. The best thing for us is that Ariunaa brings a new perspective. She thinks outside the square. When you are in small business you get so focused on working in the business, rather than on the business. Someone from outside can often provide interesting solutions – and asks the questions prospective customers might ask."

Migrant work experience is a low-risk venture for small business, Alison says, without any of the contractual obligations

that come with an employee. And migrant interns could be one way to open the door to export markets. "They have cultural awareness, language, contacts – who knows where they could take your business."

Alison appreciates more than most employers how hard it is to get over that peculiarly local hurdle called 'lack of New Zealand experience'. "We know what it's like to be on the outside – it's hard," she says. "You can't blame some people for giving up."

It's been a tough road so far for Ariunaa and her husband. Despite his Massey University qualifications, Ariunaa's husband is working as an upholsterer. Ariunaa is working part-time as a cleaner in a student hostel, taking advanced English classes and getting involved in church life. In order to make use of her considerable skills and qualifications, she is doing voluntary work for a children's literacy club and is involved with women's service club Altrusa.

"Church and Altrusa helped me to find friends, learn about culture and customs and of course, improve my English," Ariunaa says. "I really love New Zealand but I want to live here as well as I lived in my own country, with a good job and a decent salary. We migrants are willing to contribute to New Zealand because it is our country now – we live and work here."

So how does Alison respond to the naysayers who see taking on a migrant as too much of a hassle? Any new employee needs time to settle in, she says. The only difference with migrants is that they may need a little more help getting their heads around Kiwi workplace culture.

"If you are a good employer, you should find the time to ensure they fit in," she says. "You may need to spend some time on cultural things, but it's well worth it."

What is it about New Zealand ways of working that migrants need to grasp? "Workplace culture is a lot more informal

here – that was a big shock to me," says Alison, who admits she "learned the hard way" about how Kiwi offices work.

"There's a lot of negotiation, a lot of sussing out. There's a lot more networking, a lot more 'I know so-and-so is looking for someone like you'. A lot more happens on the grapevine."

Employers who take on migrants through the Palmerston North programme usually commit to 240 hours on an agreed schedule, ranging from several hours a week to full-time.

## Hamilton scheme

The Hamilton Multicultural Services Trust last year started a similar scheme which pairs job-seekers and employers over a six-week period. Work experience can be paid or voluntary, full-time or part-time, says Lorraine Hooper, migrant internship programme coordinator.

Lorraine says most of the new Kiwis she helps are "very highly skilled" people who just need a foot in the door. "I support both parties, helping employers get to grips with a multi-ethnic workforce and helping the migrants learn about the New Zealand work environment."

"Potential employers need to be aware that they do not necessarily need to recruit overseas as there are a large number of skilled migrants already here."

Lorraine has placed migrants in work experience in places as diverse as an MP's office and the local police's Neighbourhood Support office. She is a supportive, listening ear for both groups.

Phil Grey, general manager of Community Radio Hamilton, took on China-born Keke Wang through the trust for six weeks of unpaid work experience during the summer. When a job unexpectedly became vacant, Keke got it.

Keke, who has worked in marketing in China and the US, learned about the technical skills of broadcasting on the job.

## MIGRANT WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAMMES

Ethnic Council of Manawatu:  
[www.ecmpn.org.nz](http://www.ecmpn.org.nz)

Hamilton Multicultural Services Trust:  
[www.wmrc.org.nz](http://www.wmrc.org.nz)

Auckland Chamber of Commerce:  
[www.aucklandchamber.co.nz](http://www.aucklandchamber.co.nz)

Omega (Opportunities for Migrant Employment in Greater Auckland):  
[www.omega.org.nz/](http://www.omega.org.nz/)

Wellington City Council Migrant and Refugee Work Experience Programme:  
[www.wellington.govt.nz/services/ethniccomm](http://www.wellington.govt.nz/services/ethniccomm)

"Keke knew nothing about the job when she came, but she had core skills we could use and we had her trained up in three days," says Phil.

Phil says taking on interns is low-risk for small businesses. "You can take someone on without any financial risk," he says. "That may sound a bit ruthless, but you get the opportunity to take a punt on someone from another culture and background and check they do fit in. In the cold, hard world of running a business, that's a benefit."

And the benefits of welcoming a migrant are personal, as well: "I have found it quite enriching."

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