

The New Zealand Herald

Your Business: Hiring right with Louise O'Sullivan, DogHQ

By [Caitlin Sykes](#)

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When did you make your first hire in your business?

From day one my business couldn't function as a one-man band so I needed staff lined up before I could open my doors. The difficulty was as a business in a relatively new field with no customers, I could only offer casual contracts and no guarantee of hours.

I needed people who had the right skills, but who were also prepared to start on that basis – quite a big ask, and there were a number of seemingly suitable applicants who had to walk away because they needed guaranteed hours. But out of that process I did find two perfect starters, one of which is my now my manager in the business four years later.

How did you go about finding those first employees?

In a previous career I'd hired a number of staff who reported to me so the process itself didn't daunt me. What did daunt me was that I was offering casual work for a business that didn't yet exist in an industry that at the time wasn't well known, so I couldn't expect candidates to have any prior experience.

I used Seek to find my first employees and that's my channel of choice now whenever I need to hire. I chose Seek because I knew it had the appropriate reach and I also needed to move quickly.

The fact the service is in both New Zealand and Australia has also served me well, with two great candidates coming from Australia, which isn't necessarily something I'd thought about at the time.

You've since taken on a number of staff in the business. What have you learnt about making successful hires?

For our business, I've learnt that a great attitude and team fit are just as important as practical ability and experience. I think CVs are a good introduction to someone's background and to help with the filtering process, but I've learned it all comes down to the face-to-face and 'face-to-dog' parts of our selection process.

I always ask for a covering letter with applications and I gain more insight from that than the CV itself. And if they don't send one, that's the first filter!

I would say by 10 minutes into an interview I 'know' if a candidate's the right fit for the team and business, so the next step is to see if they can actually walk the talk with the dogs. We wouldn't employ anyone that doesn't have the appropriate instinctive responses to the dogs and this is something you can't pretend.

I've also learnt that hiring is fact of life in business and as we're still growing and have casual staff, we're always



Louise O'Sullivan, owner of DogHQ.

hiring. I think the more you do it, the better you get.

What's been your experience of some of the pitfalls of the hiring process?

I've only discovered pitfalls when I haven't followed my own instincts, which I did only once at a time when we were under pressure to find a full timer who was replacing someone with good experience.

For our industry I've also found outside agencies can't really help. I attempted to use recruitment services in a couple of instances and both times it was a dismal failure. We're not even close to mainstream in terms of the skills we need from our people and I'm resigned to the fact that this isn't a task we can outsource.

What's your take on the 90-day trial process?

At the time the 90-day trial was introduced I thought this was a great thing, but now I don't think it makes a significant difference to my business. I implement the 90-day trial, but I think the relationship you have with your staff has to be based on honesty and respect from day one so I focus my hiring process on selecting the right candidate for the long term.

I'm really conscious of the potential stress of 'needing to please' it places on a new employee so I try to be quick to offer feedback during this time and have even released staff from this 'phase' early as a vote of confidence.

The only advantage, especially for a business like ours that requires a unique set of skills, is we get a better opportunity to see people at work and how they deal with a broader range of situations, but maybe 30 days would be enough for that.

What would be your key piece of advice for other small business owners wanting to make the right first hire?

Always trust your gut. If something is bothering you about someone and you can't explain why, even if they seem perfect, then it's a no.

Coming up in Your Business: What is the experience like for immigrant entrepreneurs who have set up businesses in New Zealand? If you've got a story to share about the highs and lows of being an immigrant entrepreneur, then drop me a note: nzhsmallbusiness@gmail.com

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