FEATURE

Māori participation in IT: diversity insights for CIOs

Why promoting true cultural diversity in an organisation takes more than just filling a quota.

By Sarah Putt
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Kate Ross (cc0)

Following a positive career working as an IT administrator, Mark Van der Klei was curious to learn how other Māori fared in the New Zealand IT sector. He embarked on a PhD thesis with the working title 'The IT occupation's attractiveness to Māori,' in part to find out whether his experience was typical.

What he discovered in the course of his research has surprised him,

"A revelation for me was that those who I spoke with, almost all of them, identified unique things which I hadn't picked up on within organisations, which looking back retrospectively (in my own IT career) I just wasn't aware of. Being able to draw on these people's experiences offered a sense of clarity that I hadn't personally experienced while I was working," he told CIO New Zealand.

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Māori experiences in New Zealand IT

Van der klei is talking about the experience of an Indigenous person working in an IT department of a New Zealand organisation. He now teaches at Canterbury University in information systems and management and in the course of completing his PhD thesis has conducted in-depth interviews with 18 Māori IT workers throughout New Zealand. Their occupations range from managers to people working on help desk support through to business owners and educators. There was also a wide range of experience, from those who had just graduated to people who'd been working for over 35 years in the IT sector.

"Some (of the interviewees) had experienced prejudice in the workplace, but their experiences differed dependent on how they self-identified. Some were not aware because they had grown up disconnected from their Māori whakapapa (ancestry) and what was done was the accepted understanding or practice, while others who had grown up with a strong connection felt it more keenly," he says.

"Examples include being asked, 'What percentage Māori are you?' I have been asked that many times and wonder how that person would feel if I asked them what percentage New Zealander they were? And then proceeded to tell them what their identity was. This would be highly confrontational and is something I would not do, but this is not always the case in return. Another example, from a participant who identified strongly with te ao Māori (the Māori world), was when they were working in a firm and their desk had a view of the reception desk. Some people, who looked Māori came in and asked to use the bathroom. Somebody came up to this participant and asked them if they knew them—and they replied, 'Why would I know them—just because I'm brown?'"

Have Māori IT workers experienced racism?

"I'm worried about the 'racism' word, because it carries so much weight. My understanding of the concept is constantly developing but my current understanding of racism is when a person makes a disrespectful comment or questions another person's identity from a position of perceived superiority without fear of credible or acceptable recrimination. Additionally, that person is only looking to confirm (as opposed to disprove) what they think they know. For racism, this is based on ethnicity," Van der klei says.

"How people dealt with this happening was dependent on the individual. Within this group it either meant people not joining or not staying long in an organisation and was expressed as a real dissonance between the organisations and their personal values—that things just didn't ring true."

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Van der klei says that from an organisational perspective, if your organisation does not have a representation of the population and if this is your goal then you probably have a problem somewhere.

The pressure to be a cultural ambassador for Māori

Almost universally those he interviewed experienced a pressure to be a kind of cultural ambassador. That it wasn't enough for them to be skilled in IT, they had to have this extra skill of being able to speak knowledgably about Māori culture.

"Those that I spoke with said there are expectations with regards to Māori culture and language. They had to be proficient in those areas as well as being at the same level as everyone else with regards to core skills. They were constantly being asked about Māori culture; they couldn't just concentrate on their job," he says.

"For those who were either disconnected from, or still working out, what it personally meant to be Māori, this was a point of pain and not a safe environment to just be themselves and learn like everyone else. I've seen this happen to people of other cultures as well and can empathise—just because you belong to a culture does not mean you know everything about it or are a representative of everyone," Van der klei says.

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"In one organisation, there were three Māori guys. One was very in touch with te reo Māori (the Māori language) and his marae and the two other people had lived very disconnected from their marae, so for them it felt safe because they had this other person as backup. But had they been on their own they didn't feel that they would be as safe because they knew they would be asked questions about Māori culture or language that they just didn't feel qualified to answer. As it was, they had been asked to translate some phrases and because they were not proficient in te reo Māori, without help would not have been able to do so, which had the potential to make them feel incredibly uncomfortable."

In that organisation, Van der klei says the management team had also identified iwi (tribes or other groups) who had received reparations from the Crown through the Waitangi Tribunal as a potential source of revenue for their company. They had identified a need to increase their knowledge and understanding of Māori concerns—but those individuals still needed the core skills to get through the interview process.

As a result, "needing to be competent in two worlds just set the bar higher for those Māori wanting to get into and progress in IT as a career," he says.

Cultural diversity is more than just quotas

There is no one 'Māori view,' and assuming that a universal perspective exists is problematic for CIOs who want to encourage more Māori in the workforce, Van der klei says.

"As New Zealanders, while there may be similar characteristics, we accept that people are different depending on the areas in which they live. If you're from Auckland you might have different characteristics than someone from Invercargill. But that view is not carried through to minority groups. So that grouping of Māori as one group, especially from an organisational point of view, is not helpful. If the object is to attract more Māori into IT, organisations would be better served looking inwards," he says.

Van der klei says a lot of organisations claim to be actively seeking more diversity in their workforce but, from those he spoke with, it appears to be more of a need to be seen adhering to workforce quotas.

"I see the concept and goal of diversity as a real issue. Cultural diversity is about having a central dominant culture and trying to find people outside of that culture to join. Problematically, those that do join (especially if psycho-metric testing is a pre-requisite to finding people that 'fit in') will only results in diversity of characteristics and not thought. Cultural diversity in the businesses that I see is done at a very superficial level—they look for differences in ethnicity or gender and by bringing these differences together the assumption is made that they are going to have different ways of thinking. But that's not necessarily the case because that's not what they are looking for," he says.

"I can cite a large multinational company, which has an incredibly diverse workforce from all over the world, but to get into the company you have to think in a certain way. If everyone is thinking the same, regardless of differences, then are you really getting diversity?" Van der klei asks.

"Research from the UK identified this as a problem, and it appears to hold true in New Zealand as well. Their work identified the benefits of identifying and looking for cultural differences as opposed to cultural diversity as a way forward. Instead of trying to impose a central culture on employees, trying to accept that everyone is different and that everyone can bring something valuable to the table"

Van der klei says a basic example of how this can play out in organisations is to consider how a department meeting is conducted. "In a typical organisational setting the leader would speak first at a meeting and then anybody who had an opinion, they would speak next. [But] if you look at what occurs in some of the Māori settings I am aware of, the leader speaks last. All the people who are new to the business would offer an opinion and then it would go from the lowest rank to the highest. The idea is not to squash the ideas of those coming through, but to temper them with experience. The leader would acknowledge the opinions given beforehand and then their job would be to make a decision, mindful of what was said and based on information and knowledge that they have."

This can lead to disagreements, but by talking openly and not being afraid of disagreements, then you promote a culture of buy-in. There must be a measure of respect and collective goal setting for this to work but these are aspects which are already mainstream. There is a whakataki (saying) that puts forth the idea that an individual can stop a war party if they come up with a good enough argument. In our news media this is portrayed negatively, from a European perspective, as Māori always arguing amongst themselves. From my perspective, I see this as a strength because it shows an ability to separate ideas and people and gives individuals the space to ask the hard questions," he says.

"Karl Popper, a noted Austrian philosopher who lived in New Zealand for a number of years, said that great people make great mistakes and it is our responsibility to break from the habit of deference and challenge those ideas least we become complicit in their implementation. By arguing and collectively deciding on a path forward you get buy-in which is the basis of tikanga—doing things for the right reason, and if you choose to do something then doing it in the right way," Van der klei says.

Advice to CIOs on overcoming the barriers to true diversity in IT

"Everyone I spoke with was working in IT because they loved working with technology. However, whenever they tried to encourage other family members into IT as a career, (even when they knew it would suit them), they hit a brick wall. There is not a lot of trust in IT as an occupation. Common responses were that you had to be really smart, or that it's hard to get into. IT also lacks the stability to be seen as a safe occupation and oftentimes means an individual will have to move to find work, whether it be nationally or internationally," he says.

"It does not help that those in IT are seen as disposable and interchangeable based on the constant restructuring common within the industry. There has been an active push within the IT sector to change the status of IT from an occupation to a profession. While this may be reflective of where it now sits, one of the repercussions is that for some it feels out of reach and, without role models to break a path, unattainable," Van der klei says.

Van der klei's advice to CIOs is to look beyond the statistics when seeking to increase the number of cultures in their departments. "You would achieve more by providing an environment based on respect where people have the opportunity to be and express their own identity," he says.

"CIOs have to become more personal and there isn't a blanket stat—you can't just say, 'We need 50 per cent more Māori or 50 per cent more females and we will be okay.' The goals are very quantitative. If you truly want a workforce comprised of people able to offer different views then it needs to be done at a deep level. Otherwise there isn't going to be any change."

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