

TRAILBLAZERS TRAILBLAZERS

Trailblazers is a collection of inspirational journeys of first generation, migrant women business entrepreneurs in New Zealand.

The path travelled by migrants within a new country is often filled with a myriad of difficult issues from social, educational and cultural differences to emotional and financial challenges. These challenges can be particularly enhanced for first generation women migrants who juggle the demands of their young families while cultivating their fledgling businesses into successful, growing enterprises; within a new business environment.

Trailblazers highlights the stories of seven dynamic migrant women business entrepreneurs who face these challenges with courage, determination, grit and optimism. Their unwavering belief in themselves, their determination to succeed and their commitment to pursuing their professional aspirations in their new homeland; is truly motivational.

We invite you to read these stories and traverse the inspirational path of courage, determination and success carved by these amazing trailblazers!

Shivani Arora

“When I noticed how well the business was doing, I told my husband ‘I don’t want to look for a job, I want to buy this shop!’”



Shivani Arora is a businesswoman and restaurateur with a passion for hospitality and a commitment to honesty and integrity. Shivani was born in Chandigarh, India, but also lived for a number of years in Bahrain before making New Zealand her home. Shivani, with her young family, first visited New Zealand in 1990 with plans to settle in a new country. However, homesickness made them decide to return to India. A decade later, they knew they wanted to come and live in New Zealand permanently, choosing this country over other possible options such as Canada and Australia.

“We always wanted to come to New Zealand because we thought it was so beautiful and the lifestyle is so good. Kiwis are so friendly; they have a supportive and motivating approach that explains why I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.”

Shivani had gained a Bachelor of Education and a Bachelor of Arts degree before migrating, and her professional background was in teaching. However, arriving in New Zealand with young children, she chose to look for opportunities that allowed her to be with, or work around, her children at all times. Shivani and her husband had owned their own business before coming to New Zealand, so she was not daunted by the prospect of becoming an entrepreneur in this country.

“Frankly speaking, I was and always am a confident person. I feel that it is a positive attribute. To achieve success you need to have confidence.”

Although Shivani was prepared for the challenges that business entailed, she needed to persuade her husband to accept the necessary risks involved and to take a leap of faith.

In 2000, Shivani and her family bought an Indian food store in Sandringham, Auckland. She describes how she came to own this business as a way of demonstrating the good fortune that she feels has always smiled upon her life in New Zealand.

“When we landed here we went to buy groceries in that shop. When I noticed how well the business was doing, I told my husband ‘I don’t want to look for a job; I want to buy this shop!’ I don’t know what happened. It was a miracle. After a month I owned that shop. The strange part was - it was not even for sale.”

From the success of that store, Shivani and her husband ventured into importing, exporting and property investments. It was Shivani’s passion for hospitality that led them into the restaurant trade. They currently own and operate two ‘Nando’s’ restaurants, both located in Hamilton, and also recently opened their first Indian restaurant in the Auckland suburb of Epsom. Now, she has a strong vision for the future. This involves substantial investment in their new restaurant and includes creating franchise opportunities, as well as a plan to add a third ‘Nando’s’ restaurant in Auckland to their growing business portfolio.

Shivani believes that neither being an immigrant nor a woman has negatively impacted on her endeavours as an entrepreneur. She credits this positive experience to Kiwi attitudes which, she believes, make New Zealanders cooperative and open to interaction. Although in her early years in New Zealand, Shivani found it difficult to juggle being a mother and running a business, she mentions that having clear priorities helped her to balance her commitments and manage her time well. A good support network has also been important which, for Shivani, has been her family, and in particular, her husband. Shivani takes a holistic approach to her work, keeping in mind that family, business and spirituality are all interconnected, something she learned from her mother. This means she always tries to conduct even the simplest exchanges with honesty and integrity.

“My mum used to tell me that you should keep your heart clear. If your heart is clear, good things will come to you. Be very open and be very good to everyone, and I think that helps me to achieve success in my business.”

One way in which Shivani demonstrates the success of this approach to business is through her innumerable contacts. Knowing many people and having positive, on-going relationships with them has enabled her to make the most of many opportunities, locally and internationally. Due to her connections, she recently had famous Bollywood movie stars Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachan at her restaurant, ‘India Gate’ in Epsom.

For Shivani, there are two key principles for success in business; passion and integrity. She suggests that other migrant women can also succeed in business by sharing these values. Shivani recommends making a commitment to serving New Zealand, and having a passion for your business. As Shivani’s background demonstrates, her business choices and involvement in numerous community and international organisations reflect her Indian heritage, yet she is passionate about her contribution as a New Zealand citizen to this country’s society and economy. Shivani believes that by reaching out to help and share her success with other people, the acts of generosity will be reciprocated. She believes that learning is important for growth, and growth is important for success. For Shivani, there is no separation between who you are and what you do, making the qualities of a good person also the qualities of a successful entrepreneur.

Cristina Casares

“I am very self-motivated because I love what I do. I always try to go to all the industry events and meet people and keep learning – I’m totally into it.”



Cristina Casares is a 3D Animation Producer who has been living in New Zealand since 2002. Her highly specialised profession and the fact that she is a woman in a male dominated industry, give her a unique perspective on migrant business. Originally from Argentina, Cristina knew from a very young age that animation would be a life-long passion and career. The limited opportunities to study her craft led her to train at the Vancouver Film School in Canada and she has enjoyed a highly successful career working in a number of countries around the world. While Cristina had several options, she chose to migrate to New Zealand, motivated by the buzz generated by ‘The Lord of The Rings’ films, as well as a strong affinity with Kiwi culture.

When Cristina arrived in New Zealand she had already secured a position teaching at the Media Design School in Auckland, which she followed with a period of time working at Huhu Studios in Warkworth. However, Cristina also came to New Zealand with her own project – an animated children’s feature film script that she had written. It was the desire to see her movie produced that spurred Cristina to start her own animation studio, ‘La Luna’. Cristina admits that when she started ‘La Luna’ she was “a little bit naive, because making a movie is not really that easy.” Although setting up her own company in New Zealand wasn’t difficult, Cristina faced a number of challenges such as travelling all over the world to raise at least \$US10 million in funds for the project through private investors. This produced her first significant setback.

“One of the investors, who was contributing half the money, fell through. That was a really difficult time; I had to start from scratch, and decided to make the movie under an international co-production treaty, between New Zealand and another country.”

Producing a 3D animation film is a long-term process, which can take up to 10 years even at a major studio like Dreamworks. Cristina has spent the last few years running her studio, as well as working as an independent producer for other studios and organisations in the industry. As the team at 'La Luna' work on developing 'The Magic Shoes', they have continued to create more ideas which Cristina hopes will also be produced in the future. She sees home-grown intellectual property as a major investment for the country's economy, as animation has the potential to create long-term revenue through TV, feature films, DVD sales, merchandising and gaming. The 'Magic Shoes' currently has co-production partners in Italy and Argentina, and Cristina is confident the project will soon be given the green light.

There are a number of challenges involved in her work that Cristina suggests are simply due to the nature of the industry.

"It's a very tough industry worldwide because you never really have a steady income. It is also more difficult to support this industry through the funding which is available because animation is actually more expensive than other TV and film projects. But I think the industry is changing and I think New Zealand can see the potential of this industry."

Cristina believes that being a woman in a male-dominated industry has been an advantage and thinks it is one of the reasons she was offered her first job in New Zealand. She believes New Zealand is special in that regard.

"New Zealand has a lot of strong female leaders and entrepreneurs, Helen Clark is an obvious example. So there really is a culture of respect for talented women."

Cristina sees this culture of respect extending to immigrants as well, which she believes comes from the Kiwi desire to travel and experience the world.

"In their own country, New Zealanders want to make sure that people feel comfortable. This makes them really good hosts."

For Cristina, success is the ability and confidence to do what you love.

"I am very self-motivated because I love what I do. I always try to go to all the industry events and meet people and keep learning – I'm totally into it."

This pro-active attitude, born out of a passion for her vocation, has enabled Cristina to build a wealth of contacts locally and internationally, to keep working when times are tough, and to continue to strive to achieve big goals. In fact, Cristina is even unsure about being referred to as a 'successful businesswoman'. She feels she still has important goals she wants to achieve. This reflects one of Cristina's strategies for success in her business: a clear plan for goal-setting.

"If you know where you are going, you can choose the right path; but if you aren't sure, even though you may choose a beautiful road to travel down, you might not be happy where it takes you."

However, as Cristina has learned throughout her career, unexpected hurdles can appear which throw you off-course.

"You need to be prepared to be flexible as well. However it's important to always keep your goals clear. On the ride, you have ups and downs, but at the end of the day success is the ability to keep going."

Galia Barhava Monteith

“As New Zealand becomes more multicultural I am able to share some insight, be it with a senior executive who is working with people from other cultures, or with a migrant who has to work in the New Zealand business environment.”

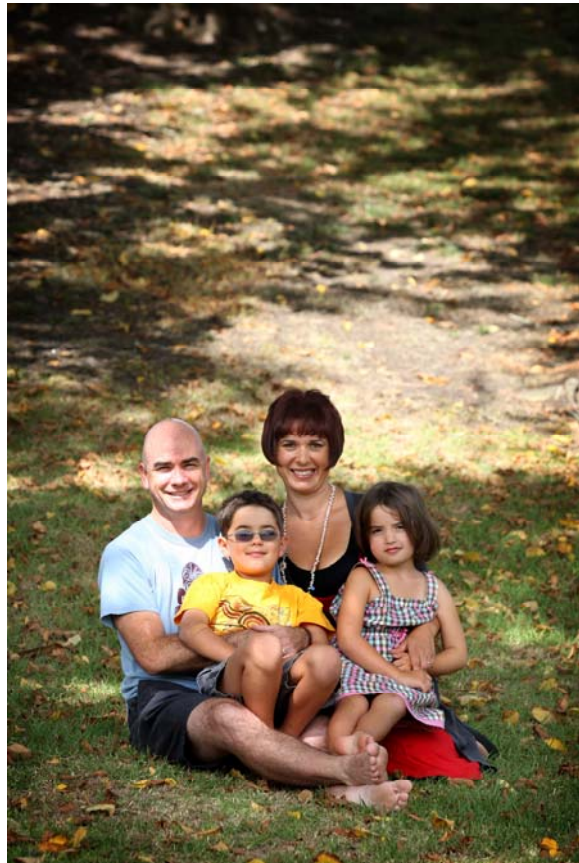


Photo provided by the Weekend magazine/NZ Herald

Galia Barhava Monteith had never imagined living anywhere other than her home country of Israel, until she fell in love in Queenstown on her OE at age 21. Making the decision to move to New Zealand and marry, Galia subsequently graduated from Auckland University with a Masters degree in developmental psychology. Galia worked with a number of internationally recognised consulting firms, making a name for herself that has now allowed her to carve out an independent career. Currently, Galia manages a portfolio of work that includes executive coaching. In addition to working as a Minister-appointed member of the National Advisory Council on the Employment of Women, Galia is also a co-owner and director of Professionnelle, a social entrepreneurial venture designed to support women in business.

The concept for Professionnelle came about through Galia's experience as an executive coach. She found she was consistently meeting with women who felt isolated, who were struggling with the challenges of juggling a full-time career and family. Galia saw this as an opportunity to create a safe space, which would empower women by discussing topics that really matter to them, such as values, mentoring and career strategies. Professionnelle holds public networking seminars in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, as well as online engagement, and also works with private sector businesses that are keen on working with skilled, professional women.

Galia does not view her status as a migrant woman to be an impediment or a handicap, but rather a strength and something to be celebrated. However, she has been challenged throughout her career by the need to create a space for herself within her chosen profession, where she can do meaningful work and make an impact, despite often feeling like an outsider. In her early career, Galia found the cultural differences between New Zealand and Israel very difficult.

“New Zealand is a very nuanced culture, and the nuances of communication can be very difficult, like understanding the subtext, understanding the way people communicate, the subtleties. I was lucky to have my husband, who for a very long time would edit my (non-confidential) emails, because it was important for me to get the tone right.”

Galia also admits that there were times when she did not fit in with the working group around her.

“The challenge was to hold your own, be authentic to yourself. Change enough so that you fit in. but always know that you’ll never fit in 100%.”

Another challenge as a woman was to be opinionated but avoid the label of ‘difficult’, particularly in some of the senior levels of management, where she believes an ‘old boys club’ is still apparent and powerful. However, being a migrant woman has also allowed Galia to carve out a niche for herself, leveraging on her point of difference in the business arena.

“It’s never been something I have formally developed, but as New Zealand becomes more multicultural I am able to share some insight, be it with a senior executive who is working with people from other cultures, or with a migrant who has to work in the New Zealand business environment.”

Galia attributes her success to a number of factors, including an incredibly strong work ethic.

“First of all, I work really hard. I worked hard throughout university to get top marks. I worked very hard throughout my career – you can’t get anywhere if you don’t work hard.”

This is compounded by a thirst for knowledge, and a commitment to lifelong learning. An important part of this learning process is investing time in understanding herself and the world around her. Galia believes in the importance of making informed, pro-active choices, in order to live and work with purpose and not by chance. She suggests that this awareness enabled her to identify a gap in the market for Professionnelle.

“Have you heard of the term zeitgeist? My understanding of it is that it’s the spirit of the times, of the period. The essence of now. And being able to read that in the world around you that is what led me to Professionnelle. In 2007, women in New Zealand seemed to have it all – Theresa Gattung was CEO of Telecom, Helen Clark was Prime Minister, and there were many more women in top positions. But I had a feeling it wouldn’t continue for too long – it was a blip.”

Another strategy Galia has used to her success is to surround herself with smart people, whom she calls trusted advisors. Trusted advisors can be mentors, friends, or peers; they are people she can learn from, who will challenge her decisions and provide honest feedback.

“Where would I be without these people? It’s the best thing you can do opening yourself up to different perspectives, listening, and getting out of your comfort zone.”

Galia encourages other migrant women to get engaged in the opportunities that New Zealand offers and to be proactive in seeking them. Galia suggests a perfect launch pad can be a school board, which is an excellent way to get involved and integrated into the community, whilst developing skills for your career.

“New Zealand is a true ‘meritocracy’. If you work hard, you’ve got the right skills, and you make an effort, you can really succeed here, there’s no judgement.”

She is also an incredibly strong advocate of the [Ministry for Womens’ Affairs Nomination Service](http://www.mwa.govt.nz/women-on-boards), (<http://www.mwa.govt.nz/women-on-boards>) which is how she came to be involved in the National Advisory Council on the Employment of Women.

“The Ministry of Womens’ Affairs nominates women from all different backgrounds to be on government boards and advisory councils like NACEW. They are incredibly supportive and even help with CVs. It is very transparent and really accessible. It’s a fantastic resource for women who want to make a contribution to New Zealand.”

Wendy Chen

When Wendy Chen moved to New Zealand from China in 1999 she never imagined herself becoming an entrepreneur.



"If you don't look back you have to move forward. I just wanted to go for it and try something out. This is a great country to be fearless in."

Wendy had studied English at University and worked for various companies in China, and came to New Zealand with the expectation of finding a job. Her first few weeks were incredibly challenging.

"We were living in one bedroom, in someone's house. Every morning at about 8 o'clock we got up and put my two year old daughter in the backseat of the car we had bought and my husband drove me around all day to attend interviews. After a while you do start to question yourself."

Although she did eventually find work, the difficulties her husband was facing settling into New Zealand encouraged Wendy to look into the possibility of starting their own business together.

Through a friend they were introduced to a supplier, who gave them some stock to sell at local markets at the weekends. It was a two week trial and at the end, Wendy and her husband had the option of pulling out. Wendy admits that the supportive welfare system in New Zealand made it easier to make the decision to go for it.

"I am really appreciative of the support in this beautiful country; you can always fall back on help from the government. And because of that there isn't any fear, it's mistakes and money, but it would never be a life or death situation."

Wendy was energetic in her approach to settling in New Zealand. Within two years of arriving in the country Wendy had taken two jobs, had returned to studying at Auckland University, and was running her own business. She was also doing the accounts for another local business, after teaching herself the skill from instructions supplied by Inland Revenue. In 2001, Wendy and her husband decided to open a store selling imported products in Waiuku, north of Auckland, where they remained for six years. From there, they moved into importing and wholesaling, and now distribute products all over the country to more than 500 buyers, while also running a retail store in Auckland. Wendy believes the decision to expand their business was a natural progression.

"If you don't look back you have to move forward. I just wanted to go for it and try something out. This is a great country to be fearless in."

Wendy has three children and juggling family and business has been a challenge.

"You always feel guilty about what you could have done for your children, always. No matter how much you do, you always feel there is more you should have done."

Furthermore, she decided to leave regular employment and try out a business idea when she realised how much her husband was struggling to settle in New Zealand.

"His work wasn't recognised here, it's a different system. He struggled with English, and he felt isolated. At one stage I wanted him to go back to China to rebuild his self-esteem, but he was committed to supporting the family."

Being a migrant also affected Wendy as she tried to integrate with the local community. While in Waiuku, Wendy felt that in the beginning some locals were uncomfortable with immigrants, or made assumptions based on the way they looked.

"Customers would come in and look at me and straight away they would speak slowly and mime what they wanted."

Despite some challenges early on, Wendy believes that by being proactive and reaching out to people, the community became more familiar with her and her family, and she remembers feeling very connected to the town and its people.

"It's normal for people to feel uncomfortable about immigrants, we need to believe in ourselves and make people believe that we are part of the community and that we can contribute and that we want to contribute."

Wendy believes many migrants can succeed in business and the workforce, as well as integrate into New Zealand society if they have the right attitude. Wendy particularly feels that confidence is crucial for anyone to succeed.

"I consider myself lucky, although I struggled in the beginning I never felt completely rejected. Although I questioned myself, I never for a minute thought that I was not capable of succeeding."

Wendy acknowledges that confidence is about knowing your strengths, but also knowing that you can make mistakes. She is passionate about encouraging people not to quit based on mistakes, to keep going, recognise the mistake and learn from it.

Further, Wendy also believes it is very important to talk to people, communicate, ask questions and accept feedback. She knows that it can take courage to reach out to people, particularly if your confidence has been knocked, but thinks this approach is absolutely necessary. Wendy's positive approach to settling in New Zealand, her self-belief and determination have helped her to make the most of challenging situations, and emerge as a successful businesswoman. Yet, she is humble when talking about her achievements. She has an encouraging message for other migrants.

"This is a lovely country, a supportive country. Just go for it! Believe that there is a place for you here and know that you will find it if you keep looking. There are so many opportunities here."

Yong Kim

Yong Kim is a force to be reckoned with, a woman who possesses an incredible multi-tasking ability and can juggle an eternally busy and varied work schedule.



“Sharing, that’s my really successful business concept! I always share everything I have, I never made a plan to have a big business, only to help people, but when you share your knowledge with people, your business will grow.”

Yong and her family moved to New Zealand from Korea in 1990, where she had been a nurse, a teacher, had run her own business and published and exhibited photography. When she arrived in this country, despite having very limited English and being pregnant with her third child, the frenetic pace at which she approached life did not slow down at all.

Yong began working as a nurse’s aid while she retrained. She passed the nursing licence exam within just four months. While nursing, Yong and her husband spent two years gaining an export licence from the Dairy Board and for the next 15 years they also exported New Zealand dairy products to one of the three largest confectionary companies in Korea. One day, while visiting the bank, Yong was told they were looking for a Korean-speaking person to join the branch. Yong took a leap of faith and began a new banking career at ASB in 1992, where she worked her way up from teller to branch manager.

A decade later, Yong opened her own mortgage and insurance brokerage company, Yong Kim Consulting Co. Ltd, which was aimed at servicing the financial and investment needs of immigrants in New Zealand. In 2004, after realising that many overseas Koreans were seeking information about possible investments in New Zealand, Yong also began to produce the Business and Property Journal, a Korean language publication which is both in print and online. In addition, Yong and her husband own a Japanese restaurant in West Auckland. Although her daughter has called her a workaholic, Yong says that because she has always done what she loves, she has always wanted to go to work and has never counted the hours on the clock.

Yong decided to leave the ASB to create her consulting company for a number of reasons. Yong had struggled with the language and cultural barriers for many years and as she earned more responsibility and attained higher positions at the bank, she felt it was becoming increasingly difficult. Yong feels that language and cultural barriers definitely have their drawbacks, but with her positive attitude can still see the humorous side.

“If people swore at me, I couldn’t understand, so in that sense it was an advantage.”

Yong also wanted her own business so that she could allocate more time to her various projects and focus on what was really important to her. Helping immigrants to overcome the challenges they face in New Zealand has been Yong's overriding passion since she first moved here.

"I just want to help people. Sharing, that's my really successful business concept! I always share everything I have, I never made a plan to have a big business, only to help people, but when you share your knowledge with people, your business will grow."

Yong has felt the effects of being a migrant woman in New Zealand. She enjoys the fact that here, men and women are treated equally, but thinks this can make things harder when women work and are still the primary caregivers for the family. Yong believes that for women to succeed in business, what they really need is a lot of family support, which she can gratefully say she has had.

"My husband was always there for the children, and my mother-in-law, who came to New Zealand with us, also looked after them a lot. They helped me overcome the restraints of being a mother, so that I could be a businesswoman as well."

Yong has also had to adjust her way of thinking to fit in with the Kiwi lifestyle and business ethic.

"Because there is so much competition in Korea, we are always working hard to be number one. Business always comes first. But Kiwis aren't like that; they close the business and go home for family time. It's a lot more balanced. I think it's a good thing. But it's hard to change how you were brought up."

Despite enjoying a more balanced lifestyle in New Zealand, Yong has no plans to slow down, even when she reaches retirement age. It has been one of her lifelong ambitions to learn more about psychology, and she anticipates that she will finally make it happen in the next year or two. This partly reflects one of Yong's key commitments: to continue learning and studying. In this country, Yong has trained and studied numerous times, for the nursing exam, as well as to be a registered financial advisor and broker.

"If you don't keep studying, what will you do? This new generation is the technology generation, life keeps changing, and you have to keep up."

Yong encourages other immigrant business women to make a plan of their goals and aspirations, be prepared to study and most importantly, to maintain a positive mindset.

"If you hesitate and doubt, you will never get anything done. Don't be afraid of failure, it is just another experience you can learn from, and you can never fail in the same way twice."

Yong advises that no business plan is complete without thorough research, so she recommends that entrepreneurs seek advice from people who already have experience in the same field, ask questions and learn from them. Finally, Yong believes that to be successful, desire for money should not be your main motivation.

"Some people have too much money, too many businesses, they aren't happy, because they have too much to protect. Success isn't about money, it's about being happy."

Edit Horvath

"I'm the type of person who shoots for the stars and I reach them, because I know what I want, I work hard, and I achieve my goals."



Edit Horvath grew up in Hungary and was a well-seasoned traveller when she moved to New Zealand more than 20 years ago. In Hungary, Edit had owned her own VIP Travel Company and was used to a position of independence and freedom. However, when she arrived in New Zealand and soon after, had her first child, Edit found she was grappling not only with a culture shock, but also a lifestyle shock as well. Despite having a wealth of international experience and training, Edit's qualifications were not recognised in New Zealand, prompting her to decide to go back to University.

"I was quite upset and angry, but I decided it was silly for me not to be working at the level of experience and knowledge that I had."

Edit graduated with a Masters degree from Waikato University, as an organisational psychologist. She mentions that while studying at University the business networks that she had formerly been involved in came to a close and were replaced by new networks that opened up during the course of her study.

"In New Zealand it was all about where you grew up, where you went to school, where you went to University. The moment I established my own relationships at University, doors opened for me."

Edit was headhunted and worked in a number of consultancies and for a number of organisations before setting up her own human resources consultancy company, Active Worklife Solutions, Ltd, in 2007.

When Edit first arrived in New Zealand, she found the country small and isolated. She encountered a great deal of discrimination and scepticism due to her foreign name and unfamiliar accent.

“There is no way I could have gone out on my own (in business) back then, because as soon as I put my name forward for an activity or project, people shied away.”

Edit thinks this attitude has changed remarkably in the last five years, and sees that New Zealand has begun to embrace diversity. Being a migrant also challenged Edit as a young mother.

“My in-laws were in Stewart Island, and aside from them, there was nobody, so there was no support. It was really hard. And you can’t build a career based on someone else taking care of your child.”

At one point, Edit realised her fast-paced career was causing her to miss out on raising her daughter. She made a decision to slow down, which she admits was very challenging.

“I’m the type of person who shoots for the stars and I reach them, because I know what I want, I work hard, and I achieve my goals.”

However, Edit believes she made the best decision, because she admits that she does not separate professional and private goals in her thinking. Instead, she follows her instincts and makes decisions based on her ‘gut feeling’, in both spheres of her life.

Today, Edit continues to face some challenges as a woman in her professional field.

“There are certain areas and industries, where being a woman makes it hard to receive respect, be given credit, and be given responsibility.”

However Edit sees the challenges she has faced as an asset and believes the skills they have taught her can be translated in many ways, giving her an edge in the business arena.

As a businesswoman, a partner, and a mother, Edit fills a variety of roles on a daily basis, and reflects this in her ability to adapt and work with a variety of different clients in diverse business cultures. One of these skills is her ability to see alternative avenues when hurdles appear.

“I never dwell on the negative. If I try one approach and it doesn’t work, I try another approach. You never hit your head against a wall twice.”

Edit has some key suggestions for helping other immigrant women in New Zealand to succeed in business. She recommends having someone, who is ahead of you on the journey, as a mentor can be incredibly helpful. Even now, when Edit is a mentor to others, she still remains in contact with people whom she can bounce ideas off and who offer her an alternative perspective. Edit is also selective about the type of work she does, as she knows that this is where her motivation comes from.

“I learn every time I get to work with a new business. So what I want are great projects, interesting work, and interesting people to work with.”

Edit also credits a large amount of her success in business to her cautious approach, even though she says this may not be the most glamorous strategy.

“It is important to be safe as a businessperson, a woman and an ethnic person, and that isn’t easy at times. Knowing when to shut up and walk away can be really hard. You’ve got to tread quite carefully before you know there is solid ground beneath you.”

On a positive note, Edit believes that the challenges she faces as an immigrant businesswoman make the work she does better, stronger, and more sustainable. She believes sustainability is the most important factor of success and suggests that sustainability encompasses not only business but family as well. Edit is confident that her priorities will continue to provide the direction for the journey ahead.

Odetta Ntezicimpa

"I just think life will be easier if everyone is positive. If you don't open up to people, you'll never learn their language. If you don't smile at anyone, no-one will smile back at you. And if you don't greet people, no-one can reply."



Odetta Ntezicimpa came to New Zealand as a refugee from Burundi in 1999. She spent three years living in a refugee camp in Tanzania and two years in Kenya before she made New Zealand her home.

Odetta spent her first year in New Zealand as a single mother with young children and no savings. Although she was fluent in French, Swahili and her mother tongue Kirundi, Odetta struggled with limited English, and took any opportunity available to improve her English skills. She then got involved in voluntary work, but knew that in order to provide a better future for her children she would have to find paid work. However, this seemed to be nearly impossible as a single parent with few resources.

Learning to drive in New Zealand had a remarkable impact on Odetta's life. She can vividly recount the challenges of living in Auckland with limited options for transport.

"I had my little baby; he was four months old, while my daughter was three and a half and needed to go to kindergarten. Where I come from, everyone can carry their babies as they walk up the road, but here everyone goes by car. It was winter and travelling by bus wasn't practical."

Odetta's life became much easier once she passed her driver's licence. She felt it was a significant and liberating achievement and recognised that other migrant women would also benefit hugely from learning to drive. Odetta first became involved in teaching friends and fellow migrants how to drive through her volunteer work. After two years, Odetta saw these lessons as a way to revive her former profession as a teacher, and a means to support her family. She completed her training course with the Automobile Association, which qualified her as a driving instructor, and subsequently started her Mobile Driving School in 2008.

Odetta initially found it very difficult to establish her driving school. As a refugee she needed a micro-loan to start up the business, but her first application for an enterprise grant was rejected on the basis that her project would not be financially sustainable.

“That was so disheartening, I failed, and my plan had failed. But it didn’t matter to me, I still wanted to continue, I still knew that it would help people.”

Odetta was able to make her ambition a reality through Migrant Action Trust. Together they worked on a business plan and she was given a loan with a long-term repayment plan. She used the money to buy a car, get her new company name displayed on the vehicle and a second set of controls installed on the passenger side.

Odetta’s role as an instructor is multi-faceted. She teaches driving skills, but she is also a reassuring face for many migrants who are struggling to settle in New Zealand. Teaching people how to drive is truly her passion, and she believes the main purpose of her work is to empower people.

“When you move from a learner’s to a restricted licence, it’s really an empowering experience. Sometimes after a student passes, we all dance and hug and kiss, and I just know that it’s a huge success for them. At the end of the day it does change somebody’s life.”

Odetta feels at home with other migrants and refugees, and one thing she loves about her business is that it introduces her to many people from many different cultures. At the current count, she has taught people from more than 30 ethnicities. This can often present challenges however, and Odetta has learnt to cater to different cultural expectations, in particular responding to different gender roles.

“Many women are not able to take lessons with a male instructor. Sometimes when I teach a man, his wife will come along to watch. Particularly with Muslim women as well, when I teach them their husbands will ride along and watch. It’s a bit of fun and I never feel uncomfortable.”

In spite of the challenges she has faced, Odetta has an overwhelmingly positive attitude, and while it is subconscious, she believes this may be an attribute which has helped her to succeed.

“I just think life will be easier if everyone is positive. If you don’t open up to people, you’ll never learn their language. If you don’t smile at anyone, no-one will smile back at you. And if you don’t greet people, no-one can reply.”

Odetta knows that many other migrants face the same language barrier she faced when she first arrived in New Zealand and recommends taking every opportunity to learn English, whether it is being brave enough to talk to someone, or reading the road code. She also advises other immigrants to think creatively when it comes to their career paths.

“Everyone I met was always talking about what they used to do and complaining that they couldn’t do it anymore. Maybe you have to change course, but if you stick with the skills you already have, it isn’t as hard. I couldn’t teach in schools anymore, but I found another way to teach and I’m really happy. I will be teaching my whole life.”