

Opening minds to change

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Should you base people's salary on the hours they work, their years of experience or their output? That's just one of the mind-teasing questions posed by The Mind Lab by Unitec and Tech Futures Lab founder, Frances Valintine.

Frances, who was recently named as one of the country's top three Innovators of the Year, excels at asking questions that make you question the status quo. She puts this down to her upbringing on the family farm near Hawera, where the isolation meant that she often had to think creatively and independently.

"And my father never treated me any differently from the blokes – I never had the feeling that there was anything I couldn't do."

She says she found her calling where education meets technology, finding it inspiring how information can empower people.

"Education is the perfect sector for me as diversity of thinking is often encouraged. You don't want cookie cutter people there – the greatest benefit is the richness of difference."

A natural entrepreneur, Frances realised early in her career that she liked to create organisations where she would want to work herself.

"If you were to look at all the successful new companies, you'll find that they are all based on a very transparent, flexible, non-hierarchical model – which is what we have at The Mind Lab."

Launched in 2013, The Mind Lab initially provided the means for children and young people to learn about science and technology in a creative and collaborative way. Soon, Frances found that teachers were interested in learning The Mind Lab's teaching techniques. Just a year later, she launched a postgraduate course in collaborative and digital learning for teachers, in partnership with Unitec.

"We run programmes across the country – including really small towns like Rolleston or Ruatoria as well as the main towns and cities. We had to think about employing a completely flexible workforce, so everyone is on an individual contract. Our starting point was to ask potential employees 'what works for you?' she says.

"If people want to work from home or in the deep of the night – so be it. It's been very rewarding as we now have people in the regions who feel valued, and they see themselves as working flexibly for an awesome salary."

Frances tells the story of employing a man who later suggested his wife, who was equally well-qualified, might be interested in a role. "She asked me what the salary was, and when I told her it was just the same as her husband's she was surprised. It never occurred to me that for some people the same job would not have the same salary. Salaries here are based on job sizing and output."

“We have a lot of people coming through now that may only have four or five years experience but they make a huge contribution. I have seen people who may have only been on a project for 15 minutes but they bring a gem of information that moves the whole project forward. I think it’s one of the challenges in New Zealand – should you pay people for the hours they put in or the results?”

Frances also launched Tech Futures Lab last year, a consultancy which helps businesses get on top of the challenges posed by disruptive technologies. Changes that we are already seeing in the workplace are a hint of what is to come.

“You now have young people making up the majority of the workforce whose expectations of work are quite different to their parents. Many don’t want to work for a large corporation but they have the skills that companies are going to be looking for. Technology and automation will mean that more jobs will become obsolete, and an older generation of workers will have to re-skill.

“I see pockets of change already, but traditional hierarchical companies will find it hard to survive unless they are prepared to be more flexible.”

