

Your business



BY GILL SOUTH

NZ's Little School eyes big export future

A fast-growing preschool enterprise is to set up two purpose-built schools in China

How better for a New Zealand business to woo the Chinese market than through education?

Preschool business Little School is in negotiations to set up two large Little Schools in two Chinese cities.

When founder Maria Johnson was first approached about setting up a Little School in China with 700 students, she felt completely overwhelmed.

"I started hyperventilating," says the former primary teacher, who has set up five Little School centres, four in Wellington and one in Auckland, over the past 10 years.

Johnson's private preschools for 2 to 5-year-olds, targeted at families who want their children to hit the ground running when they start school, typically have around 30 children.

Whereas she will have purpose-built, multi-level schools in China, Little School venues in New Zealand are in nice homes in upmarket suburbs such as Wellington's Kelburn and Khandallah and in Auckland's St

It's taken two years to establish these good relationships.

Maria Johnson, Little School founder

Heliers. Johnson owns all the properties and is buying a fifth in Remuera.

The China expansion has come through connections of Johnson's husband, Craig. He is on the board of Global Horticulture (GlobalHort), the kiwifruit producer, based in Xian.

"It's taken two years to establish these good relationships," she says.

Johnson reckons the first school will open at Wuxi, 45 minutes from Shanghai, in 2014.

She has been asked to do teacher training as well.

"The good thing about going to China is they will be providing a lot of the buildings and resources. I am bringing the IP [intellectual property]. In China it has to be a JV [joint ven-

ture]," says Johnson.

A Chinese education delegation that recently visited Little School in New Zealand "loved the confidence of the children," she says. "The Chinese want their children to be creative, flexible, and know how to work as a team."

Little School, which had a growth rate in its first three years of 447 per cent, has just entered the Deloitte Fast 50. Its turnover is sub-\$5 million, with 26 staff, either qualified primary school or early-childhood teachers.

Johnson started up in Khandallah, where the family lived, in January 2003. What drove her was a belief that there was a need to bring her background as a new entrant teacher into the early childhood sector.

"It is a structured but creative learning programme which produces a great foundation to enter 'big' school," says Johnson, who is the current president of the Early Childhood Education Council of New Zealand.

Johnson's inspiration for Little School came from living in Sydney's Rose Bay when her children were young.

The Kiwi mother-of-four was impressed with Kincoppal, which had an excellent preschool attached to its

primary school. When she came back to Wellington, there was nothing like it for her 2-year-old twins.

Almost 10 years on, the entrepreneur is in line for awards. She has been shortlisted for *Next Magazine's* Woman of the Year 2012 and previously won the Wellington Businesswoman of the Year Award and *Her Magazine's* Best Small to Medium Business Award.

"I would like to see Little School in many countries so I reach as many children as possible," says Johnson, who also has the United Arab Emirates in her sights.

Little School is a private New Zealand company established by professional, passionate and qualified owners.

Little School provides quality private preschool education for children aged 2-6 years. It is not just childcare, babysitting or a play-based programme. The Little School aim is to offer a child a learning environment which is planned.

READ MORE

For more in the Your Business series go to nzherald.co.nz/business



Maria Johnson says the Chinese want their children to be creative, flexible and know how to work as a team.

Picture / Steven McNicholl

GET THE ANSWERS

IT sector continuing to flourish here despite tough economic times

Close-to-customer service needed more than ever, writes Grant Burley

Recent research predicted that IT work in New Zealand might be outsourced to cheaper countries. For SMEs wanting to know the current trends in the IT sector, a leading IT recruiter says the number of jobs have increased from 43,000 to 46,000 over the past five years and the sector continues to thrive.

What is the state of the IT sector in NZ at the moment?

IT is the only industry that has continued to grow during tough times despite the fact that some businesses have been more cautious about hiring and

putting big projects on hold. Across every sector, from wine, marine and manufacturing to retail and professional services, the use and application of IT is increasing by leaps and bounds.

It's no longer just about having a person sitting on a mainframe in a bank basement. IT skill sets are imperative at every level of business from marketing/social media through to the strategic planning of future projects. Kiwis are highly regarded worldwide as IT innovators and professionals with broad skill sets and the ability to manage complex projects.

YOUR QUESTIONS

We want to solve your business problems. From tax to recruitment, every week, with the help of specialists, we will answer your questions on any business topic. Send questions to Gill at: southgill1@gmail.com

What do you think about predictions that IT jobs will dry up over the next five years because of increased "off-shoring" and use of internet services? Nothing could be further from the truth. IT is increasingly about the user experience, whether that's via personal devices or management of com-

plex mission-critical IT solutions through to call centre operators. It demands close-to-customer service which you don't get from someone sitting in India.

That said, off-shoring has its place and always has had, but it's certainly not going to dry jobs up here. We're actually seeing more jobs in areas such as call centres being reallocated to New Zealand because it provides better value for customers. People in this industry are not a commodity but a very valuable resource that can't be "off-shored".

Furthermore, IT salaries are rising rapidly throughout Asia and India so the labour is not necessarily cheaper there. An entry level worker in India, for instance, is getting around

US\$25,000 now with a rise of 20 per cent to 30 per cent every year.

What are the trends in terms of IT services businesses are seeking?

There is an overwhelming demand for developers and subsequently testing requirements, information and software architects. Right now, we have more than 100 vacancies for developers within our business and more than 500 spread among the industry.

While global uncertainty has made businesses a little more cautious in their hiring over the last year, we're seeing companies starting to pick on projects they'd put on hold earlier in the year.

Organisations are using technology to increase efficiency, to enhance and

develop their service and for any complex solution in particular, whether it be for government or a small business, it demands skilled, close-quarter service.

What are businesses looking for in new recruits?

It's very much about the soft skills, the ability to work alongside a team, to understand and meet customer needs and communicate ideas and concepts coherently. It's definitely not an industry for geeks.

So just because you have an IT background doesn't mean you'll be guaranteed a job. The need is for people with technology skills as well as an understanding of business, marketing and what drives customer needs.

What is happening to New Zealand's IT businesses?

New Zealand IT businesses are hugely successful in developing niche software products, both for export and local markets.

Consider some of our accounting products for example, such as Xero which now has a major customer base offshore.



Grant Burley is director of absoluteIT recruitment agency.

Logo revamp brings Microsoft into 21st century

Hollande supports Greece