



BUSINESS

The Twilight Zone

While the Northern Hemisphere sleeps, Aucklanders are picking up the slack. Amy Cameron talks to people turning our time zone into a business advantage.

There was once a shoemaker, who worked very hard and was very honest," wrote the Brothers Grimm in the early 1800s.

"But still he could not earn enough to live upon; and at last all he had in the world was gone, save just leather enough to make one pair of shoes.

"Then he cut his leather out, all ready to make up the next day, meaning to rise early in the morning to his work... In the morning after he had said his prayers, he sat himself down to his work; when, to his great wonder, there stood the shoes all ready made, upon the table."

Fast forward a couple of centuries, and the shoemaker's helpful elves are hard-working Aucklanders. The shoes? They could be a freshly translated document, or a couple of hours of edited film footage. A fix for a software bug, or a newly drafted patent.

But while the Grimms' elves toiled through the night (and were paid in clothes and shoes rather than cold

AMY CAMERON IS A METRO STAFF WRITER.
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN MALLOCH.



MEMBERS OF THE SWEET SHOP'S CREATIVE TEAM BRAINSTORM (ABOVE) FOR A EUROPEAN CLIENT AND (OPPOSITE PAGE) HOLD A TELECONFERENCE WITH A COLLEAGUE IN NEW YORK.

hard cash), Aucklanders have figured out a way of delivering these products first thing in the morning without having to work all night. It's simple: work for the other side of the world.

AUCKLAND TRANSLATOR David Lord has been doing France's night shift for the past 15 years — first in Australia and, since 2000, from his office in the old gardener's quarters of his Sussex farmhouse-style property in Manurewa. "I look out onto the park, so I'm sort of in a goldfish bowl of green," he says.

Lord studied languages in Sydney (with a two-year interlude in Paris), then in 1979 he went back to Paris to study translating and interpreting at the Sorbonne. He spent the next 12 years working as both a freelance and in-house translator before moving back to Sydney to set up as a freelancer. All his clients were French businesses he'd already worked for.

Initially, communication was a major stumbling block. "We didn't have email, so they'd often fax me documents, or I would have to pick them up from their computer, which meant getting modems to co-operate. Communicating from modem to modem was a nightmare... Of course now it's fabulous. Technology today has overcome all those problems."

Lord is what's called a technical translator (as opposed to a translator of literature or journalism), and works mainly in the areas of water treatment, building materials and nanotechnology. "The more technical the text, the more I enjoy it," he confesses. Documents that require an overnight turnaround — such as press releases or a company's internal announcements — make up about 40 per cent of his work.

"[I can] offer an immediate service for someone without it being a hassle, or odd hours for me... My clients really do like the fact that there is this 12-hour time difference and they can rely on it."

SHAUN DONAGHEY, general manager of IT consultancy firm Intergen's Auckland office, says his business has also started to exploit New Zealand's time-zone

advantage. Last month, Intergen completed a software development project for a London-based marketing agency. The clients were the producers of the Spanish wine rioja and the software "enabled them to market their wine better and grow their business", says Donaghey. "It was a system to deliver information to people all around the world, developed by us here in New Zealand."

During the process of software development, he says, there are always bugs to fix. "A lot of the time it's great because they can, during their day, collate items that need to be looked at or tested... and by the time they rock up the next day, basically all those items have been covered off by us."

He's keen to expand the company's overseas business, and is working on case studies highlighting how the time-zone difference can work to a client's advantage.

WHEN BUSINESS PARTNERS Melanie Bridge, Paul Prince and Sharlene George set up television-commercial production house The Sweet Shop in 2001, they immediately pitched it as an international business.

Bridge, at the time the only director, says that by 2001, most of her work was coming from overseas anyway. "We knew that was a more lucrative market to be in," she says.

These days, The Sweet Shop (its Auckland office was once a confectionery factory) employs 15 fulltime creatives, and up to 50 when it's got a big job on. When a script comes in from an overseas agency, the creative "hub" can get a pitch ready for the next morning in, say, London, without having to pull an all-nighter. "Nowadays the deadlines are getting tighter and tighter to the point of being ridiculous," says Bridge. "[The time zone means] we have an advantage."

A recent pitch was for an advertisement for a Middle Eastern city development. "At 4pm in Auckland it's 8am [in Dubai]," says Bridge. "What that means is that you get a whole work day before they get up. That was an advantage in the pitching process."

MARK FRANKLIN, chief executive of TZ1, New Zealand's new carbon market, believes carbon credits are likely to become an around-the-clock commodity. He says his company asked itself, "How do you operate in this time zone, and how do you use it to your advantage given the fact that you've got to be a global business? We've set up to see if we can exploit some difference."

TZ1, formed by the New Zealand Stock Exchange early last year, has two main components: a carbon registry and a carbon exchange. The registry is already running, and the exchange is expected to open early next year. "We think that having a presence in this time zone with global trading will be a critical part of the way this pans out in the future," Franklin says. He thinks traders could choose TZ1 not only because it bridges the gap between London and New York's carbon markets, but because "we're the first market open [each] day".

FOR AN OVERSEAS company using Auckland talent, or trading while New York and London are closed, the fact we're open while they sleep isn't the only reason for using us. It can also be cheaper. "It's not costing them any more [for an overnight turnaround]," says Lord. "It makes me very competitive in relation to my colleagues who live in the country. For a freelancer in France to do that kind of turnaround, if the company wants it at 10 the next morning and they don't get it until 6pm, that means they're going on to time and a half."

Intergen's Donaghey says the service his business offers is also very competitive. "The value an organisation gets for the work that we do, what they pay for, is cost-effective compared to a similar organisation based in the UK, Europe or the United States."

For TZ1, the bonuses of trading in New Zealand while the world sleeps are more about favourable local



conditions than value for money. "The emissions trading scheme in New Zealand is slightly different from other emission trading schemes... so there may be reasons that global entities want to trade down here when we're open," says Franklin. "[Our scheme] allows credits generated outside New Zealand to be brought in and allows our credits to be traded outside the country. Some other schemes are a bit more domestically focused."

THERE ARE DOWNSIDES to working for the other side of the world. When The Sweet Shop was pitching for the job in Dubai, the time zone was a double-edged sword. While staff could get a full day's work done before their Dubai clients got to work, there was also

a temptation to continue working throughout the Dubai day as well. "Working internationally does tend to mean that you work way more hours," Bridge says.

Lord says the isolation of working from home for clients in France is one of the major downsides to his job. "By temperament I'm quite happy to work alone, but my contact with colleagues and clients is limited to email and the occasional telephone conversation. I've been working with people for 10 or 15 years that I've never met personally."

The 10- to 12-hour time difference between New Zealand and France (depending on the time of year) means there is an overlap of workable hours in the morning and evening, but any problems Lord encounters have to

wait until then. "There's a certain dissatisfaction in not being able to solve a problem immediately, or possibly sending off a text with the odd hole in it or a question that's still outstanding. I sometimes never know what the solution to that problem was."

Donaghey says some of his clients are hesitant about working with a company thousands of kilometres away. "One of the things that organisations are concerned about is geographical remoteness, in terms of how do we manage delivery and how do we engage with a customer. But there are so many ways that through technology you can still have a very strong communication channel... A lot of those issues around physical proximity are pretty much negated."

For Lord and Donaghey, having the boss on the other side of the world has its upsides. "It works well," says Donaghey, "because sometimes when you've got people in the same room or in the same city, they continually communicate with you, and sometimes there's a lot of time that's spent communicating... That's not to say we don't like talking to our customers, but when certain tasks need to be allocated, it's pretty black and white in terms of what needs to be done."

Lord agrees: "I get to do an uninterrupted day because nobody is asking me to do something immediately. When you work locally, that happens all the time. 'Can you just translate this sentence?' or, 'The client didn't like this word, can you change it?'"

There's also the bonus of being paid in your client's local currency — supposing the exchange rate is favourable. "It's about 0.47 [euros to the dollar] at the moment," says Lord, "but I've seen it go up to 0.57, and that's a massive difference in earnings for me. But that's the life of an exporter."

And that Dubai pitch that Bridge was working on for The Sweet Shop? As we went to print, she was in Budapest, a few days into the shoot. "We threw everything at it. It's a 90-second commercial, which is completely unheard of, and it has a very large budget. I'd say it's [currently] the biggest job in the whole world." •

'I thought... people like me don't have drinking problems.'



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