



Exporter Profile

Ian Walton, Atrax Group NZ Ltd



Ian Walton is Vice-President - Aviation and Logistics with Auckland based ATRAX Group NZ Ltd, the world leader in the Design, Manufacture, Integration and Support of Industrial Weighing, Measurement, and Control systems for the Airport and Logistics industries.

Ian “fell into” international trade during his “Big OE” in the UK when, with a background in technical sales, he worked for oil and gas giant Halliburton as internal sales support. An international position became available and soon Ian was in charge of a sales area that included Eastern Europe, CIS and the Middle East.

Although well-travelled (his family lived in several countries before settling in New Zealand when he was 11), Ian still felt the impact of cultural differences: *“The Russians were extremely educated but totally theoretical - knew how to design it, knew how to build it, but didn’t know how to kick it to make it work.”*

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Twenty years on, Ian evidently made the right move. At ATRAX, a 100% export company, he has total global responsibility for sales through agents and direct to customers and spends at least 35% of his time overseas each year.

So what is it about working internationally that gives Ian such a buzz? *“The travelling, even after all this time. If you time it right, you can avoid a lot of the winter and most people are great, they love New Zealanders because we are perceived to be different from Americans and Europeans.”*

And the downside? *“Time away from the family, but when I’m home, most of my work is done by phone or email, and how many Dad’s can take a week off if they need to spend time with their kids and mates getting mucky in the bush somewhere? You just need to prioritise and make sure you’re home for birthdays, school-camps, prize-giving’s and such. During my children’s time at school, I’ve been on every school camp.”*

Ian sees the scarcity of qualified staff in New Zealand as the greatest challenge facing a company like ATRAX, and the lack of good quality sub-suppliers with an

international mind-set.

He regrets not taking a degree straight from school, and gets frustrated by the pre-requisite tertiary education for senior posts, believing that real-life experience is more important.

But things are changing, Ian is now half way through his studies for the Diploma of International Trade with the New Zealand School of Export, in order to validate his experience with a formal qualification.

For years he has *“got by on logistics and finance, but not known the details, or if I’m doing it the best way ... so far, the course, especially the logistics side and finance is very detailed.”*

Ian’s advice to people starting out in export, is to get help from NZTE to check that you are ‘export ready’ and form an association with an existing exporter.

Then *“do a sales plan based on highest projected costs, worst possible exchange rate and see if you can still compete. I have seen many companies struggling recently with steel prices going up and the USD going to 80c, suddenly they were not cost competitive and had no Plan B.”*

Skills and knowledge are also of huge importance. Ian believes good communication to be his greatest asset and as a useful reminder that we are blessed with two ears and only one mouth—*“I have seen people who are far better salesmen than myself give perfect presentations, but they did not listen to the feedback.”*

General knowledge of the world, its peoples and customs are also important, *“read the international sections in papers and publications and when you travel, mix with the locals”.*

Of course the ability to travel successfully

is an added advantage: *“People not in the industry still tell me it must be great flying first class and staying in 5 star hotels ... I wish ... they should do a two week trip to Kazakhstan.”*

In terms of government assistance, ATRAX has received limited funding for new market ventures but as Ian says, when it comes to boosting exports *“We have to be in a position that we would do it anyway; if government money is that important to you, you should not be in the business.”*

And finally, *“New Zealand is a great country for designing and building high-tech niche equipment. Loads of companies can do it, but not many can market them internationally. Therefore, the technology is sold to an offshore company for a small percentage of its true value.”*

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