

Helping hands for bosses

Darren Greenwood

When you run Microsoft, Auckland International Airport or any business you might need an extra helping hand at home.

Thus, Paul Muckleston and Simon Moutter are among the thousands of busy New Zealand bosses employing an au pair.

They are customers of Kiwi company Au Pair Link, which now claims to be the largest au pair agency in Australasia and one of the largest in the world.

This year, the company will send and receive 1000 au pairs across the world, nearly all to New Zealand.

Swedish-born Cecilia Robinson founded Au Pair Link six years ago, when as a fulltime law student at the University of Auckland, she realised there were no large or credible agencies in New Zealand.

The former au pair had wanted to carry on with the work she had enjoyed so much in the US and give others the chance to do the same.

Over the years, her business has expanded to employ 35 staff as well as act for 1000 au pairs. Such growth helped her win the Supreme 2012 *Her Businesswoman* of the Year award last month.

Mrs Robinson said she had always planned for growth by setting out a clear structure for her business, with staff having clear goals when they were appointed. Having experienced board members, including former Telecom chief executive Theresa Gattung and Dr Lee



AU PAIR INDUSTRY: Cecilia and James Robinson run the largest au pair agency in Australasia

Things to consider

- Have you a spare room for the au pair?
- Remember the au pair will be in your home and part of your family. Learn to share your home and space.
- Due to visa requirements, au pairs can only stay 12

months but many early childhood teachers only stay that long at a centre anyway. ■ Consider the support that will be provided by the agency. ■ Talk to others with au pairs and learn from their experience.

Mathias, deputy chairman of Auckland District Health Board, also helped.

In 2009, Au Pair Link became the first au pair agency in New Zealand to be licensed by the Ministry of Education to provide educational services to the home. Now, it has a dozen such

licences and the company is the fifth largest home-based provider in the country.

This year, the first Educational Review Office reports "rated Au Pair Link very highly proving that alternative forms of childcare can achieve the same educational outcomes as a centre-based [daycare/kindergarten] environment."

Mrs Robinson said growth was being partly

driven by childcare becoming too expensive and parents working long hours finding centres were not open long enough for their needs.

Au Pair Link's clients are mainly middle or higher income families who want the flexibility of live-in childcare with household duties and a cultural experience for the children.

But at near \$200 a week, many find an au pair "cost effective" in combination with a kindergarten, especially for working mums returning to the office. The au pairs mainly come from Germany, Sweden, Norway, France, Denmark, the US and Canada.

Each undergoes rigorous screening such as medical assessments, police record checks, references and interviewing. On average, the agency's au pairs have 1400 hours documented childcare experience and 10% are men.

"There has been a steady increase in interest in male au pairs from New Zealand host families," Mrs Robinson says. "This is partially being driven by single mums who would like to have a male role model for their children but also from families with older children who recognise the value of having a man in the house who can assist with their children's hobbies and interests."

Au Pair Link expects to double in size in the year ahead.

"Our core focus is to continue to drive our business to be the most successful au pair company in the world and to ensure we are recognised as one of the best and largest early childcare providers," Mrs Robinson said.

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Better than a nanny

Microsoft NZ managing Paul Muckleston first began employing au pairs when he and his wife returned to New Zealand from Germany.

Both have busy jobs and weighed up whether to have a nanny or au pair for their eight-year-old son and five-year-old daughter.

"An au pair made sense as sometimes I would be away on business and my wife would be doing shift work. Having extra hands in the house reduces stress. We go for a more mature au pair, which costs more, and we go for someone with kindergarten experience," Mr Muckleston said.

Their current au pair, a kindergarten teacher from the US, is their fourth au pair. She has "a great rapport with the kids" and as well as picking them up from school, also helps cook the family meal.

"A fulltime nanny costs \$30,000-40,000 a year but au pairs cost \$300 a week, though you have to cover their room and board," he said, adding that Au Pair Link "finds the right candidates" and is "very professional for the service fee."

"It takes away all the hassle," he said.

Simon and Sophie Moutter found four "great" au pairs through Au Pair Link.

"Au Pair Link provides both families and au pairs with the support they need to make a placement successful – from assisting the au pair to settle into a new country, to providing fun and exciting resources for au pairs to use with children, to mediating when there are areas that aren't working well between the au pair and family," Mr Moutter said. "We also love that they manage the employment side of things, including payroll and tax obligations."

Delwyn McConnochie runs a software business in Christchurch and finds au pairs most flexible for her and her busy husband. They also allow a close bond between the au pair and Maggie, the McConnochie's baby, including delivering on early childcare education.

Au Pair Link was chosen for its Ministry of Education accreditation and the support given to families and au pairs. A comprehensive questionnaire helped Au Pair Link find the right au pair and the au pairs had shown a great willingness to learn and an eagerness to do a great job.

"All our au pairs have been happy to do some household chores for us, prepare an evening meal, do the grocery shopping from time to time



WOODHAM FAMILY: Lyndal Woodham said having an au pair helped her and her husband John cope with busy schedules as well as giving their four boys a link to the outside world.

and run the odd errand," she said.

"They have shown maturity beyond their years and we trusted them implicitly very quickly," Mrs McConnochie said.

This is helped by the family planning and managing the expectations of either party, giving the au pair set hours and the same rights as any other employee.

"I cannot speak highly enough of the au pair concept. If you want flexible, dedicated, energetic trustworthy and cost effective childcare, there is no other option," she said.

John Woodham runs an importing business in Canterbury called Turf Equipment. He and his wife Lyndal, a former au pair, have four children and wanted an au pair as they knew au pairs were flexible and provided a good way to introduce their children to other cultures.

"Having someone in your home makes everyone more at ease and comfortable with each other," she said.

The couple contacted Au Pair Link in 2010, impressed by its Ministry of Education recognition, and have since had four au pairs. They choose Scandinavians as the family is keen to learn those languages.

Mrs Woodham said having au pairs in the home helped them cope with busy schedules as well as "giving your children a link to the outside world."

The children had been "positively influenced" by their au pairs, did get attached to them but also looked forward to the next one.

CSNZ

An evening with the Honourable Simon Power, QSO

Is it in our best interests for law and regulations in Australia and New Zealand to move to some alignment?

Presented by
Hon Simon Power, QSO
Managing Director, Private,
Wealth & Insurance,
Westpac New Zealand Limited

DATE Thursday 16 August 2012
VENUE The Northern Club
19 Princes Street
Auckland 1041
TIME 5.30pm for a 6.00 pm start



From 2008 to 2011, Simon Power was Minister of Justice, Commerce, Consumer Affairs, State-Owned Enterprises and Associate Minister of Finance in the Government of New Zealand and was ranked fourth in the cabinet.

Simon will address the merits and opportunities of Australia and New Zealand moving to a greater alignment with laws and regulations.

Register at www.csnz.org
or email info@csnz.org.nz (with credit card details)
Freephone: 0800 242 669

Presented by: Chartered Secretaries New Zealand Inc.

'Mentored' by Theresa Gattung

Au Pair Link has benefited from the guidance of former Telecom New Zealand chief executive Theresa Gattung.

"Cecilia approached me after she heard me speak a couple of years ago and asked if I would consider mentoring her and her husband James in building their business," Ms Gattung said.

"I was impressed with the way they were managing their business and agreed to work with them. They meet regularly with fellow board member and chairman of the Health Promotions Agency Establishment Board Lee Mathias and myself and we discuss all aspects of the business with them.

"They are entrepreneurial combined with being very thoughtful in the way they



Theresa Gattung

approach matters. For example, from day one they set up systems in the company with a view to scaling the business up at the appropriate time.

"They have, of course, faced challenges as they have grown, have persevered and come through at the other side, at the same time keeping their team and customers with them."