

Interview With Viki Forrest - CEO, ANZA Technology Network

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Just over a week ago I did a story on the [ANZA Technology Network](#) and workshops they have coming up which help prepare Australian startups to make the move into the US. (if you're interested you'd better be quick, the first [workshops](#) kick off in Sydney on Friday)

The CEO of ANZA Technology Network, Viki Forrest, is a tech industry veteran with experience and advice to pass on to the local startups trying to make the move into the US.

Viki took some time out of her busy schedule to answer some questions for us, below

Tell us a bit about your background / projects you've worked on.

I've worked in tech in Australia, Asia and the US since the 1980s. I've seen a lot of changes in technology and the marketplace for it since that time. I've worked for a US-owned, multi-national major corporate player in Sydney and Asia, and then was part of an Aussie startup that went to the US in 2000.

When did you decide to make the move to Silicon Valley and what were your motivations?

I came to the Valley in late 2000 with an Australian software startup – we had our sights set on the US despite the economic downturn. The downturn actually made setting up in the Valley very inexpensive at that time, everything from office space to employees' salaries were very affordable and in abundant supply. Unfortunately, for this company, as well as many others, the downturn became the dot-com crash. We were out of business by the end of 2001.

How did ANZA Technology Network start up?

There have always been a lot of Aussie and Kiwi ex-pats in the US, and particularly California and Silicon Valley. But back in 2001, there was no business network for ex-pat Australians and New Zealanders – plenty of drinking opportunities with other Aussies and Kiwis but no way to connect for business. Given all business is done through personal networks in the US this was a major obstacle for those who were not born and raised here. Executives from Austrade, NZTE, Macquarie Bank, Silicon Valley Bank and Intel Capital recognized this and established ANZA Technology Network as a non-profit organization to address this gap. In 2002, ANZA hosted its first Gateway to the US Summit. These events

give innovative Australian and New Zealand businesses an opportunity to showcase their companies and products before a US audience of entrepreneurs, investors and potential partners. It has proven to be a very successful model in getting entrepreneurs from Down Under connected with the right people in Silicon Valley who can help them gain a foothold in the US market.

What are some of the most common mistakes you see Aussie start-ups making?

Lack of a focused market entry strategy and lack of speed in execution. Also, a lot of the Aussie entrepreneurs still think they can 'work from home' – they want to stay in Australia and run US operations from there and come to the Valley every 6 weeks or so. That just doesn't work for Australians or anyone trying to launch business in the US — you have to be here to execute well no matter what your business model is.

The overwhelmingly most common mistake Aussie startups make is underestimating the essential nature of a loyal, well-connected, personal network to breakthrough in this market.

What do you think is stopping Australia from becoming a leading global tech-hub?

Australia is a very small market relatively speaking – execution must happen elsewhere – Europe, Asia or the US . While we're great innovators we just don't have the experience to commercialize at the pace and success rate that you see here in the US . So much good innovation simply goes nowhere.

So many Australians enjoy the comfortable life of working for a large multi-national so we become great salespeople in a small market but we don't get the experience of real product marketing – it's all done for us elsewhere. ANZA is all about successful commercialization of great innovation – we hope to change the executive ranks of Australians, make them great marketers and great at execution so they can return that talent and expertise to Australia.

Do you think that, in light of the cessation of the Commercial Ready program that it still makes financial sense for Aussie start-ups to keep their R&D in Australia?

At the moment the US is looking quite competitive as an R&D location – this is a very recent turn and I think it's a combination of the softening of the US economy making doing business here more affordable and the very low unemployment in Australia making salaries close to parity with the US. Add to that the demise of the Commercial Ready program and you'll find most Australian CEOs considering alternative locations for their R&D. A cautionary remark on this – a good alternative program to the Commercial Ready grant could change all this.

What advice would give an Aussie start-up considering making the move into the US market?

The US is the largest market in the world and very attractive because of language, law, business practices etc. While these things make it easy for Australians to do business in the US, it also must be remembered that the US is a very complex market to navigate. You have to really understand your market, your competition and have a very clear value proposition for your customers. If you want to do business in the US you have to be in the US – understand the consequences of that and prepare well. I'd be remiss if I didn't recommend taking a good look at the programs ANZA runs – they are specifically designed for Aussie startups moving to the US.

Any last thoughts?

As an Australian who has worked in the technology industry for over 20 years—and in Silicon Valley for the past 8 years—I believe the entrepreneur with classic Australian business discipline, innovative strength, creative problem solving and pure 'Down Under' determination who is ready, willing and able to adapt to the speed, focus and subtle but important cultural differences demanded in the US is destined for success—that's what ANZA is all about.

A big thanks to Viki for taking the time to chat.

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