

NZIM/EAGLE TECHNOLOGY YOUNG EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR

Mason Pratt

PROVOKING A PASSION FOR EXCELLENCE

A personable mix of passion and humility allied with the business nous that's helped transform an IT startup to profitable entity within six years saw Mason Pratt take top place in a strong field of contenders for the 2007 NZIM/Eagle Technology Young Executive of the Year Award.

The 32-year-old founding partner and managing director of Wellington-based Provoke Solutions has led the business through a period of strong growth. From a staff of five in 2001, the company now has over 40 employees and an annual turnover of several million dollars.

After graduating with a double major in Marketing and Information Systems from Victoria University, Pratt had worked his way up from web designer to account manager at Glazier Systems before leaving to set up Provoke. An MD at the age of 25, he's since been responsible for defining and implementing his company's vision as well as developing strategy, building brand recognition and pulling together a well-qualified and enthusiastic team.

And if he was going to step into a parallel reality any time soon, this successful entrepreneur would probably be a school teacher or business mentor.

"I love the idea of teaching, mentoring, imparting knowledge," says Pratt.

It goes with a leadership style that is all about bringing people along with him.

"I've always strived to develop a motivational and inclusive leadership style. I like to lead by example, providing inspiration and motivation to staff to achieve win-win outcomes for all those involved."

The notion that people are the company's most important asset earns more than mere lip service. Pratt lives it. His enthusiasm, when he talks about developing a culture of excellence that touches all who are part of it, is infectious.

"The things I look for in people are not grades or degrees but attitudes and motivation. And I want people with Provoke Solutions on their CV to be sought after. I want it to be the Google of New Zealand – a company that is recognised for its excellence, that people coming out of university or polytechs really want to work for."

He feels it as a personal failure if he loses staff to a competi-

tor – and admits fear of failure is a powerful driver for him. As is passion.

"I believe that the most important ingredient for anyone to succeed in any sphere is having a passion for what you do. I'm passionate about creating a successful business that attracts and retains the best people our industry has to offer."

While putting his hand up for recognition is "a little uncomfortable", Pratt sees it as an acknowledgement for the company and its people.

"They say that behind every great man is a great woman, but in my case the 43 staff at Provoke are really the ones responsible for my success. I've been fortunate to have their backing, their smarts and their buy-in to lead an exceptional and very successful company. So, in short, passion and great people have been the key to my success."

Not that there aren't also some great women. Pratt credits his wife for getting to the heart of any issue he wants to discuss, while his mum (who runs her own business) has been an influential mentor. She helped build his communication skills, says Pratt, by pointing out that "God gave you two ears and one mouth" for a reason.

"So I do have well-developed listening skills and treat all suggestions or ideas from my staff seriously."

A huge advocate of formal and informal mentoring schemes, he's sought guidance from local IT luminaries through involvement in the IT Association of NZ (of which he was the youngest vice-president) and enjoys mentoring his team. It's clearly a two-way street. As one of his mentees puts it: "I attribute my success so far to the valuable lessons Mason has taught me and the time he has spent developing my skills."

It's an area he'd like to do more in – particularly if it helps stem the local brain drain offshore.

"We have lost a lot of talent. I want to keep the IT industry a fresh local centre of excellence down under – a place for talented people to come back to."

As the judges noted, Pratt may be an entrepreneur at heart – but he reveals the energy, curiosity, discipline, realism, competence and commitment that is much needed on the local business scene. They have "a strong hunch this will not be the only successful business this candidate will create and lead".



JUDGES' COMMENTS

WINNER

MASON PRATT

MANAGING DIRECTOR, PROVOKE SOLUTIONS

The judges were impressed with Mason Pratt's strength of character, excitement, anxiety and humility. He demonstrated strong business acumen, appreciated the value of a robust business plan and the need to regularly review it and understood the need to attract and retain the right people and grow them. Pratt also understands his own capabilities, what he knows and what he doesn't and he relies on the team around him.

He has grown the initial \$1000 capital investment in his company six years ago to a profitable entity with a multimillion-dollar turnover. His original small team of talented friends is now a workforce of 40.

Solutions focused, Pratt clearly understands the difference between attracting "rock star" employees and building a valuable and talented team. He plans to be an employer of choice for smart young IT graduates now and in the future.

An entrepreneur at heart, he revealed the energy, curiosity, discipline, realism, competency and commitment needed to be successful in business today.

FINALIST

ALLISON COLLINS

SCIENCE TEAM LEADER, LANDCARE RESEARCH

A star quality candidate, Allison Collins has personality and presence. Such was the passion for her industry that she convinced her hard-nosed judges that the top 15 centimetres of the nation's soil supports 60 percent of our GDP.

She has, said the judges, a strong intellect, drive and enthusiasm for her work and is likely to make a great contribution to the future of her sector.

Collins is a strategic thinker with leadership strengths and qualities. She has achieved real outcomes in moving people forward in their thinking, approach and performance to the benefit of the company. She has experienced success through her attracting new funds to the sector and has managed the pressures and consequences of failure when funding bids were unsuccessful.



FINALIST

JO TARLTON

GENERAL MANAGER, AUCKLAND ECO MAINTENANCE

Jo Tarlton is intensely interested in the business in which she is involved. She has made a successful and rapid transition from employee to general manager in her organisation. She has significant managerial strength and a strong ambition to move to a chief executive role in the future.

Tarlton's key strengths are in fostering client relationships, achieving profitable growth for the benefit of the company and mentoring and developing her people. She is a great role model in terms of work/life balance and has a strong sense and desire to see that her business' activities contribute to sustainable communities.

