https://doi.org/10.34074/rere.00609

Interview

From Choice to Contribution: A Business Transformation and Innovation Profile of Marlou Queniahan

Lorraine Skelton

AIC OTAGO POLYTECHNIC

ABSTRACT

In an increasingly interconnected world, business transformation is shaped not only by technology and strategy, but also by the people who understand how organisations really work. As an alumnus of Auckland International Campus, Marlou Queniahan's journey is especially significant, reflecting the ways in which AIC graduates continue to contribute to professional practice and organisational development in Aotearoa New Zealand. His trajectory highlights the bi-directional value of the immigration experience, integrating a global perspective with a localised, resilient adaptability that enriches the New Zealand workforce. Marlou's decision to settle in New Zealand was shaped by choice, chance encounters, and the positive experiences of friends already living here. His professional journey then required persistence, adaptability, and the practical understanding of what immigrants need to navigate in order to begin again. With experience across information technology, business systems, healthcare, and the car repair industry, Marlou brings a grounded and people-centred approach to transformation. His work focuses on making processes visible, aligning stakeholders, reducing operational friction, and helping organisations move toward clearer, more scalable ways of working. In this interview, Marlou reflects on migration, professional growth, stakeholder trust, innovation, artificial intelligence, and the importance of grounding transformation in the real operational context of everyday work.

INTRODUCTION

Marlou's story is one of adaptability, relationship-building, and purposeful transformation. As an alumnus of Auckland International Campus, his experience is particularly relevant to this profile because it demonstrates how AIC graduates can carry their learning into diverse professional environments and contribute meaningfully to New Zealand's evolving business landscape. His decision to come to New Zealand was not the result of a single fixed plan, but rather a series of positive encounters, reflections, and possibilities. Having had what he describes as "the luxury of choice" in deciding where to settle, he identified New Zealand as the final and right destination, influenced by conversations with old friends and their rewarding experiences of life in this country.

That sense of considered choice also reflects Marlou's wider professional approach. Across his career, he has consistently gravitated toward work that connects people, processes, and improvement. He describes himself as someone who has always been "willing and open to build relationships", and this openness has become central to the way he understands business transformation. His practice is grounded less in rigid frameworks and more in careful listening, structured discovery, process mapping, and the ability to notice both what is said and what remains implied. For Marlou, meaningful change begins with understanding the reality of how people work, and then helping

them see a clearer path forward.

Marlou *"I was fortunate to have had the luxury of choice on where to settle down. New Zealand was the last and perfect choice, brought about by a couple of chance encounters with old friends."*

For Marlou, New Zealand first became a serious consideration through healthcare, but that initial interest was strengthened by the positive experiences of friends who were already living here. Those conversations mattered because they transformed New Zealand from an abstract possibility into a practical and emotionally convincing option. His move was therefore shaped by both opportunity and trust: the opportunity to choose a place to build a life, and the trust built through the experiences of people he knew.

Employment, too, became part of his migration story. Marlou describes himself as fortunate, but he is also clear that establishing a professional footing in a new country required effort and resilience. The process was not simply about finding work; it was about understanding the expectations, systems, and realities that immigrants must navigate when they begin again in a new environment.

"The understanding of what immigrants need to go through to get started gave me an edge. It was a grind and a half."

This comment captures an important feature of Marlou's story. He recognises the difficulty of the employment journey, but he also frames that understanding as a source of professional insight. The experience of having to work through uncertainty, rebuild networks, and learn new systems appears to have sharpened the same qualities that now shape his transformation work: patience, observation, empathy, and a practical appreciation of what it takes for people to adapt.

That combination of gratitude and perseverance has shaped Marlou's professional identity. He explains that relationship-building has always been central to his career, and that this naturally connects with business improvement. In his words, relationship-building "stacks very well" with making improvements more generally, from setting up processes through to supporting growth. This is a useful insight into the way he approaches consulting: he does not separate process improvement from people. Instead, he sees relationships as the foundation that makes improvement possible.

"In my entire career, I have always found myself willing and open to build relationships. This stacks very well with making improvements in general, from setting up processes and then growth."

Marlou's consulting and transformation work has primarily focused on information technology and business systems, but his experience has extended across several sectors. He has worked in healthcare and, more recently, in the car repair industry. While these industries may appear quite different on the surface, Marlou does not see them as disconnected. The tools, vocabulary, and operational pressures may change, but the underlying transformation challenge often remains similar: understanding how work moves through an organisation, where friction appears, and how people can be supported to work in clearer and more coordinated ways.

"The overarching work has always remained similar at its core."

That core is the ability to understand work as it is actually experienced, rather than as it appears in formal documentation. Marlou's approach therefore begins with discovery. He typically combines structured discovery, process mapping, and iterative alignment, rather than relying on one rigid framework. This flexibility allows him to respond to the specific organisational context in front of him, while still giving the work enough structure to move forward.

"I typically combine structured discovery, process mapping, and iterative alignment approaches rather than relying on a single rigid framework. I bring with me flexibility and eagerness to listen intently to both what is said and implied." This attention to what is "said and implied" is particularly important in transformation work. Organisational problems are not always expressed directly. They often appear in repeated workarounds, informal dependencies, unspoken assumptions, and the small frustrations that teams learn to tolerate. Marlou's listening-based approach helps bring these issues into view. By making work visible, he helps teams understand not only what is happening, but why certain patterns of delay, rework, or confusion continue to occur.

This same approach shapes how Marlou thinks about innovation. He sees innovation as something that may come from a directive, a requirement, or an operational problem that needs solving. However, he does not treat innovation as an abstract or purely creative exercise. For innovation to be useful, it must be grounded in structure. The need must be identified, the goal must be understood, and the boundaries of the challenge must be made clear enough for people to work within them productively.

"If you identify the need and the end goal, the box becomes clear so you can think in and out of it."

This is a practical way of understanding innovation. Marlou is not suggesting that organisations should be constrained by existing assumptions; rather, he argues that people need enough clarity to know what problem they are solving. Once the "box" is visible, teams can think both inside and outside it. In this sense, structure does not limit innovation. It enables it.

Like many transformation professionals, Marlou frequently encounters challenges around stakeholder alignment, unclear ownership, and existing ways of working that are difficult to shift. Teams often develop their own processes and priorities over time, and these local ways of working may make sense within a single division while still creating friction across the wider organisation. When an organisation then attempts to introduce a more consistent operating model, resistance can emerge because teams are being asked to change practices that feel familiar, functional, and tied to their own sense of control.

Marlou addresses this through early and continuous stakeholder engagement. He facilitates discussions to understand how work is actually done, makes those workflows visible, and helps teams align on a shared view of the problem. From there, he works with stakeholders to define practical future-state processes that clarify ownership and handoffs. His work is not about imposing abstract transformation models. It is about helping teams see their own work more clearly, recognise points of friction, and agree on improvements that are realistic enough to be adopted.

Resistance to change, he notes, often comes from uncertainty or a perceived loss of control. In one transformation initiative, Marlou worked across divisions to support new services and products. Each group had its own way of operating, and some operational leads were reluctant to change processes they believed were already effective. Rather than pushing a predefined solution, Marlou began by understanding their concerns through both formal and

informal discovery.

He mapped current workflows and made the differences between teams visible. This helped identify where delays, duplication, and rework were actually occurring. Importantly, Marlou did not frame the change simply as standardisation. Instead, he positioned it as a way to improve visibility and reduce workload friction, issues that stakeholders were already feeling in their day-to-day work. By working with teams to co-design a simplified intake and tracking approach, and by keeping the change close to their existing workflows, he helped make the new process more pragmatic and easier to adopt.

"Instead of positioning the change as standardisation, I framed it as improving visibility and reducing workload friction, something they were already feeling."

This incremental and collaborative approach reflects Marlou's wider philosophy: transformation is more sustainable when people can see themselves in the solution. His approach also shows a strong understanding of organisational psychology. If people experience change as something done to them, they are more likely to resist it. If they experience change as something that addresses problems they already recognise, they are more likely to engage with it.

Marlou measures success across several dimensions: process performance, adoption, and business impact. Cycle time, reduction in rework, and how consistently teams follow a new process are all important indicators. However, he also looks at less tangible outcomes, including stakeholder satisfaction, whether teams feel their problems have been addressed, and whether the new way of working has genuinely made their day-to-day work easier. "For me, success isn't just delivery, it's when the change is embedded and genuinely moves the team forward." One example of Marlou's impact involved introducing a structured process overlay across multiple divisions to improve how work flowed from intake through to completion. At the time, teams were operating independently, which created inconsistent handoffs, delays, and a heavy reliance on individuals to keep things moving. Rather than implementing a large, top-down change, Marlou took a gradual approach. He worked with stakeholders across divisions to understand their workflows and introduced small but meaningful structured elements, including clearer intake points, defined ownership, and visible handoffs.

He also kept reinforcing these concepts in discussions and workshops until they became familiar and part of how teams naturally described their work. This is a subtle but important aspect of transformation: change becomes more durable when people begin to use the language of the new process themselves. In Marlou's case, this improved visibility, reduced delays between stages, and made it easier to introduce new services using the same structure. The result was a more consistent and scalable way of working, with less reliance on manual follow-ups and better coordination across teams. This directly supported operational efficiency and service expansion. It also demonstrates Marlou's preference for practical transformation: change that improves how work moves, how people collaborate, and how services can grow without increasing confusion or dependency on individual effort. Looking ahead, Marlou sees artificial intelligence and automation as major forces in business transformation. However, he is careful to distinguish between adoption and value. For him, the real differentiator is not simply whether an organisation uses AI, but whether it applies AI with judgement. Organisations need discernment about where AI can create meaningful efficiency or improve decision-making, and where human input remains essential.

"The real differentiator isn't just adopting AI. It's the ability to apply it with proper judgement."

This is a balanced view of technological change. Marlou recognises the value of AI and automation, but he does not see them as substitutes for understanding. The risk for organisations is not only that they fail to adopt new technologies, but that they adopt them indiscriminately. In Marlou's view, technology must be grounded in operational purpose. It should support clearer decisions, more efficient work, and better outcomes, rather than being used simply because it is new.

Despite rapid advances in technology, Marlou also observes a renewed focus on the human side of transformation. Organisations are realising that without stakeholder understanding, trust, and adoption, even well-designed solutions fail. This is driving a stronger emphasis on engagement, communication, and ownership as part of transformation efforts. For Marlou, this is not a separate concern from technology. It is the condition that determines whether technology-enabled change will succeed.

Marlou stays current by combining structured learning with close attention to real-world application. He follows industry updates, thought leadership, and emerging trends in areas such as AI and digital transformation, but he is most interested in how these ideas can be applied in practice rather than only understood at a conceptual level. He also learns from the environments he works in: engaging with stakeholders, seeing how different organisations operate, observing how strategies are formulated, and noticing what works and what does not.

"The key is usually how it is grounded in real operational context."

Trust is another central theme in Marlou's consulting work. He establishes trust by being consistent, transparent, and focused on understanding the client's reality before proposing solutions. Early in an engagement, he invests time in conversations and workshops to understand how work is actually done and what problems each stakeholder expects to be addressed. He then translates these insights into clear, tangible outputs such as process maps, visual workflows, and structured summaries.

These outputs help stakeholders see that their environment has been accurately reflected. This builds credibility because it shows that Marlou is grounding the work in context rather than assumptions. He maintains trust through clear and regular communication, by setting expectations early, and by delivering small but meaningful outputs throughout the engagement. Acting on feedback is also important because it helps shift the relationship from a transactional exchange to a genuine partnership.

"Acting on feedback helps shift the relationship from transactional to a genuine partnership."

A particularly challenging engagement involved working across multiple divisions that operated in silos, each with their own processes and some resistance to aligning around a shared way of working. Marlou began by building an accurate picture of how work actually flowed, then translated that understanding into visual process maps to make gaps and dependencies visible. Rather than pushing immediate standardisation, he focused on creating shared understanding and co-designing practical improvements with stakeholders that fit within their existing workflows. By introducing changes incrementally and grounding everything in real operations, resistance shifted into collaboration. The outcome was improved visibility and ownership, reduced friction between teams, and a more consistent approach that did not disrupt day-to-day work. This example reinforces a key theme across Marlou's interview: trans-

formation works best when it respects the current reality while still creating a better future state.

What motivates Marlou most is the opportunity to make a meaningful impact on how people work day-to-day. He genuinely enjoys helping teams solve problems, easing operational burdens, and making work more efficient and manageable. There is satisfaction, he explains, in taking something complex or frustrating and turning it into something clearer and easier to navigate.

"There's a lot of satisfaction in taking something complex or frustrating and turning it into something clearer and easier to navigate."

Marlou is also motivated by the people aspect of transformation: working with different stakeholders, building relationships, and creating an environment where collaboration feels natural. For him, transformation is not just about delivering a solution. It is about working with people in a way that makes the process engaging and the outcomes genuinely valuable to them.

"For me, it's not just about delivering a solution, but about working with people in a way that makes the process engaging and the outcomes genuinely valuable to them."

Marlou continues to develop his expertise through a combination of industry awareness and hands-on learning. He learns from each engagement and refines how he approaches stakeholder engagement, process design, and delivery. Development, in his view, is not simply about knowing more. It is about improving how knowledge is applied to deliver better outcomes.

Marlou's journey demonstrates how business transformation is built through patience, listening, structure, and trust. His experience across sectors shows that while industries differ, many organisational challenges share a common foundation: unclear processes, fragmented ownership, and the need for better alignment between people and work. By making complexity visible and helping stakeholders co-design practical improvements, Marlou contributes to transformation that is not only implemented, but understood and sustained.

As New Zealand's business environment continues to adapt to technological change, artificial intelligence, automation, and shifting workforce expectations, professionals like Marlou bring an important balance of systems thinking and human insight. His work reminds us that transformation is most effective when it is grounded in real operations, shaped by the people affected by it, and measured not only by delivery, but also by whether it genuinely helps teams move forward. As an AIC alumnus, Marlou's story also offers a meaningful example of graduate contribution: a journey from migration and study to professional practice, where personal resilience and relational intelligence become part of the way organisations change for the better.