



Is Foreign Labour Better?

Presentation to the BHRDA Meeting

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By Darron Cash

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the invitation to join you this evening. Your topic, though provocative, is timeless. The answer of course, is simple, but I'll provide a little context for my positions.

It is a pleasure to share the panel with Philip Galanis and Dr. Ian Strachan. Dr. Strachan and I came of age at The College of The Bahamas and have the distinction of serving as president of the COB Union of Students. As for Mr. Galanis, he is my former boss. The Ernst & Young partners will never fully know how much I appreciated, respected and admired them. Phil is not aware of this, but when I joined EY in 1995, they were my second choice. After completing my MBA I circulated only two resumes, one to EY and the other to Bahamasair. The airline was in financial jeopardy and being a newly-minted “Master of the Universe”, I was excited by the prospect of being a part of its transformation. But, I never heard back from them.

Ernst and Young on the other hand was the most progressive public firm in the country. While others were hosting golf tournaments, E&Y had admitted the first woman partner, was bringing leaders together each year through the Business Outlook and had just implemented the Entrepreneur of the Year Award programme. On top of that, the firm had emerged as the best place for Bahamian professionals to advance. Two years after I joined the partners would take a professional gamble and afford me the unique privilege of service as a government senator while remaining an active member of the professional staff. Meanwhile my Boss, Mr. Galanis, served as an opposition Member of Parliament. You'll see the relevance of this history in a moment.

Self praise notwithstanding, I have said before, that I consider myself a fairly good example of what education is supposed to do. I graduated from COB with a commitment to play an active role in national development. The lessons I learned at COB—from the demonstrations to the classrooms—crystallized my thinking about how private citizens and public servants can contribute to the development of public policy.

The lessons were so powerful, that four years after COB I wrote in my application essay for graduate school that my career ambition was to participate in the movement of my country from a position of dependence to one of economic

independence and self reliance. I outlined a few other ambitions that will be revealed in time, but I recount that particular one to underscore the point that I left COB with a very clear understanding of the role I needed to play in advancing my country. The nation's development was personal to me. I owned it, and accepted my responsibility for playing a direct role in its advancement. I am happy to say that I was one of many who were so inspired to serve.

Today, we continue to send high school graduates—and experienced workers—off to acquire more education, skills and experience on the understanding that they will return home to better jobs and bigger challenges. And every year our best and brightest return to this land of opportunity they call home inspired and determined to discover whether there is real opportunity for them.

Today, global competitiveness is the great challenge we face, and it will be so for the foreseeable future. The world is far more competitive, capital and labour are more mobile and the competition for both is intensifying. The nations that succeed will be the ones that best equip their people with the skills and attitudes to seize or create opportunities.

Today, The Bahamas is far from where we need to be in terms of global competitiveness.

What will it take to change our fortunes?

As it was with me, what is required now is for us to inspire a new generation of Bahamians to take ownership of the country. This new “generation” must acknowledge the challenges we face and commit themselves to bringing their energies, skills and creative capacities to the task of nation building. And as we strive to advance the nation through global competitiveness, we must acknowledge that we cannot do it alone, and we do not want to.

As a developing nation, it is clear that we do not have all the skills necessary to achieve our national ambitions. If we are to seize new opportunities, we must embrace expatriate talent.

So, having provided that context let me respond directly to your question. Foreign labour is not better; that is far too generalized a statement. Here are my views within the context of our status as a developing nation:

- Foreign labour is desirable, necessary, and sometimes essential
- Foreign labour is sometimes better than the local alternatives
- Foreign labour adds value and richness to the Bahamian work experience.
 - Let me emphasize this point. There are countless expatriates who have come here on business and who, having made this their home, have made invaluable contributions to our nation’s development—not just teachers, policemen, health care professionals, but business people as well. We are right to respect and celebrate their contributions.
- Lastly, I submit that foreign labour should **supplement** and not be a **substitute** for a people’s energized determination to create their own destiny. Therein lies our biggest problem.

The national debate should not be about whether we need or should have expatriate workers here in the Bahamas. It should be about how we get the government and the private sector to strike the right balance between their short-term economic and political interests and the country’s long-term national interest.

This seems like such a reasonable approach. So what is the problem? Why this constant debate about Bahamian versus foreign? We keep having the same debate because, as I have suggested, the issue will not go away anytime soon because we are a developing nation. **More importantly, it persists because of the continuing failure of both political and business leadership. Even as we embrace foreign participation in the advancement of our nation, willful ignorance or ineptitude in the implementation of immigration policies cannot be acceptable.**

For too long, governments have persisted with an “ends justify the means” philosophy. Specifically, it seems to me that it seems to them, that as long as we have more Bahamians than expats, there is nothing for us to complain about. Under this modus operandi, blatant affronts to the letter and spirit of Bahamianisation could be overlooked.

Through their complicity, they contribute to the establishment of a glass ceiling that frustrates and angers, and leaves far too many qualified senior-level Bahamians feeling ill served by their government. The most unkindest cut of all

comes with respect to issuance of government contracts. From the Governments' perspective, it seems that Bahamians are never quite skilled or experienced enough. And the days when Government will take a chance on its people and offer a "Kennedyesque" style challenge have gone since Sir Lynden was in the chair. In this regard, a positive response to the question about whether governments have demonstrated confidence in Bahamian professionals is the exception, when it should be the norm. So, the debate continues.

As HR managers, you should have an active voice in the great debate. I submit to you that if you are not an active part of the solution, then you ARE a part of the problem.

Far too many HR managers roll over and play dead as their organizations execute HR policies that work to the detriment of Bahamians. Consider the experience of a local organization that restructures its back office operations, imports a pair of high powered senior managers on work permits, and then make redundant a number of experienced and capable Bahamians. And after the redundancy of those Bahamian professionals, there are ZERO potential successors in place for the foreign nationals they just employed. This makes perfect sense for the narrow interest of the business, but how does that ass-backwards application of the immigration policy serve the national interest? In my view it doesn't. Yet some Bahamian HR managers and Bahamian CEO signed off and the Department of Immigration saluted as this charade was played out.

The solutions to these challenges come from the level of public policy. Political leaders must lead the way in establishing the right tone at the top. As provocative as the topic and the related debate are, the time for talk is over. It is time for meaningful action. The true opportunity for change will come from selecting the right national political leaders who share our values about how best to advance the country and ensure the full and meaningful inclusion of its best and brightest. Leadership matters. Your leadership as HR professionals is also critical.

By now, all of you are familiar with the works by Malcolm Gladwell—The Tipping Point, Blink, and his last book, Outliers. In Outliers, he stresses the point that people who are celebrated for individual achievements sometimes appear to have done so on their own. BUT, he argues, such

achievements were not possible without the support of organizations or communities or cultures or family networks or mentors that made those individual achievements possible. I mentioned the E&Y experience earlier because I wanted to drive home a very critical point for you as human resource managers. None of us who come to the table with personal goals and professional ambitions can achieve them without the support of organizations and the progressive leaders and thinkers who head them. In that regard, you have a tremendous opportunity to make a difference. Thank you