

From Eastern Europe to New Zealand Influential Business Transformation and Innovation Leader: A Leadership Profile of Aleksandra (Sasha) Skakun

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ABSTRACT

In a world where businesses must adapt rapidly to technological and market shifts, professionals like Aleksandra (Sasha) Skakun are redefining how transformation is delivered. Sasha's journey from Eastern Europe to New Zealand, and from operational project management to innovation leadership, is a compelling story of resilience, insight, and strategic action. With experience spanning manufacturing, IT, and industrial sectors, she combines technical acumen with a deep understanding of people and culture. In this interview, Sasha shares her views on overcoming resistance, shaping agile service delivery, harnessing emerging technologies, and building trust through empathy and results. Her story offers inspiration for aspiring change agents and a roadmap for organisations navigating today's evolving landscape of business transformation.

Keywords: Business transformation, Innovation leadership, Change management, People-centered leadership, Digital transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Aleksandra Skakun, known professionally as Sasha, is a leader in business transformation and innovation consulting in New Zealand. Her diverse career began in European manufacturing and evolved through software development and industrial IT service delivery. Sasha's strength lies in her ability to connect strategic vision with operational excellence, always guided by a philosophy that puts people at the heart of change. Since relocating to New Zealand, she has led significant transformation initiatives across multiple sectors, earning a reputation for driving sustainable, human-centred innovation. Her journey began long before her move to Aotearoa, and it continues to inform the way she approaches change today.

Aleksandra (Sasha) Skakun

"I see transformation as more than project delivery; it's a cultural shift. The true measure of success is when people feel empowered, processes become seamless, and value creation is sustainable."

That holistic view of transformation was shaped by Sasha's own journey. She explains that her relocation to New Zealand was born from a combination of strategic thinking and personal values. "We were initially looking at the UK, but Brexit disrupted that plan. Then Australia came up, but the climate felt off. New Zealand felt right, and it offered career growth, community, and a better work/life balance," Sasha recalls.

Upon arriving in New Zealand, she pursued a Master's in Applied Management while proactively preparing for the local job market. A strong planner, Sasha analysed industry trends, identified key skill gaps, and worked to make

herself employment-ready by the time she graduated. Her break came via a network referral. Despite some initial immigration hurdles, her perseverance and preparation paid off when she landed her first role. “The interview was short but effective. Navigating the paperwork and visa logistics was the hard part. It taught me that transformation, either personal or professional, starts with clarity and ends with commitment,” Sasha reflects.

In her early career, Sasha’s approach to project management was methodical, focused on timelines, delivery, and coordination. However, she often found herself asking, what happens after the project finishes? That curiosity led her beyond one-off projects into service delivery and, eventually, into the broader realm of business transformation. “I realised delivery is just one part. Real impact comes from rethinking the model itself; how services are designed, how they evolve with user needs, and how culture supports that change,” she reflects, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to improvement.

Sasha’s adaptability has been honed across many industries, from factory floors to high-tech hubs. Early in her career at Heinz, for example, she worked closely with frontline manufacturing teams and learned to respect operational constraints. Later, in the software sector, she led agile transformations that shortened release cycles and improved responsiveness to customer feedback. In her more recent industrial projects, she has overseen complex system integrations that balance compliance, efficiency, and user-centricity. These diverse experiences, she notes, have each imparted valuable lessons: “Manufacturing taught me pragmatism: you learn fast that solutions must be workable. IT gave me speed and flexibility: how to pivot quickly, iterate, and co-create,” Sasha says.

Underlying all these experiences is a consistent focus on what Sasha calls her core framework of “people, processes, and platforms.” No matter the environment, “you adapt the proportions,” she explains, “but never lose sight of all three.”

Rather than adhering rigidly to a single framework, Sasha treats change methodologies as adaptable tools chosen to fit each situation. “ITIL, Agile, Waterfall: they all have value,” she says. “But success comes from choosing the right tool for the right job.” This pragmatic approach is coupled with a belief in frontline-driven innovation. Sasha insists that transformation starts with listening to those on the ground: “Your best insights come from people using the system every day.” One example of her people-centric approach was the implementation of a “shift-left” strategy in an IT service desk operation she led. In that initiative, Sasha empowered first-level support staff, refined issue routing logic, and instituted continuous feedback loops. The result, she notes, was more than faster resolutions: “We changed the culture of accountability.”

Sasha acknowledges that resistance to change is a natural part of any transformation. “It’s not about pushing through, it’s about listening, understanding, and co-creating solutions,” she says of her approach to overcoming objections. For instance, when introducing an automated computer imaging tool (Autopilot) at one organisation, she faced strong pushback from the IT team. Instead of forcing the change, she took a measured approach: “We paused, piloted with small teams, and showed the results. That transparency turned critics into champions.” She also makes a point to involve stakeholders at every level early in the process, mapping out whose voices need to be heard. After all, Sasha emphasizes, “people support what they help create” a philosophy at the heart of achieving sustainable change.

In measuring the success of transformation initiatives, Sasha believes in using data informed by dialogue. Key performance indicators such as first-call resolution rates or Net Promoter Scores are useful, but she views them as starting points. “KPIs like First Call Resolution or NPS are great, but they’re just indicators. I look for the story behind the metrics,” she explains. In one Asia-Pacific service desk project, for example, resolution times dropped by 40%, but the more significant result was a 25% increase in user satisfaction. To reach that outcome, Sasha recounts, her team

“built dashboards, ran feedback surveys, and celebrated wins.” In her view, such recognition “fuels momentum.”

Always looking ahead, Sasha stays attuned to emerging trends reshaping the business landscape. “Hyperautomation isn’t hype, it’s a strategic shift,” she notes, referring to the convergence of AI, robotic process automation (RPA), and low-code platforms that is changing how organizations operate. She views artificial intelligence as an augmentation to human decision-making rather than a replacement. “AI provides the insights; people make the decisions,” Sasha says, adding that “emotional intelligence and ethics can’t be outsourced.” Her strategic lens remains focused on applying new technologies to real business problems. She is careful to ensure that technology’s role is to simplify rather than complicate work, and that it empowers users instead of merely impressing stakeholders.

For Sasha, successful change leadership also demands continuous personal growth. “Transformation is personal,” she says, a principle she demonstrates by investing in her own learning through certifications, peer discussions, and mentor engagements. Every new perspective, in her view, adds value to her work. She likewise stresses the importance of building trust over time through consistency, humility, and delivering results. “Trust is built through consistency, humility, and results. That’s how you move from vendor to partner,” Sasha observes. It’s an approach that has helped her evolve from an external consultant into a trusted advisor for many of her clients.

Sasha’s story is one of purpose-driven transformation. Her ability to integrate technology with human insight, apply adaptable methodologies, and lead with empathy makes her a standout in her field. As New Zealand’s business landscape continues to evolve, professionals like Sasha provide not just the tools but the vision and trust needed to ensure change is not only implemented but fully embraced. Her journey from immigrating to Aotearoa to spearheading complex innovation initiatives illustrates how perseverance, lifelong learning, and a people-centric philosophy can turn the challenge of change into an opportunity for growth. Ultimately, her experience affirms that lasting impact comes not from imposing change, but from inspiring people to be part of it.