# Ron Hooton: Chief visionary

In his first week on the job, Ron Hooton was blindfolded, took a train and got off at a stop five kilometres away, and then walked around the shops.

He literally placed his life in the hands of his companion, a guide dog trained to help blind and low vision people navigate their way around the community.

The experience was just part of his induction as CEO of Vision Australia, the umbrella organisation providing services to blind and low vision people across the Tasman.

“It was a frightening experience, absolutely amazing to experience the confidence you gained from having a dog steering you from obstacles, stopping you at crossings, guiding you to seat on the train, using scenarios to show you where the button is to push to cross the road, a whole range of things,” says Hooton, now based in Melbourne, the headquarters of Vision Australia.

Hooton says there was another Vision Australia staff member with him, but “the dog was doing the work”.

Instead of being terrified, Hooton says, the experience gave him confidence that should he ever be struck by blindness, there will be tools and techniques that will help him.

On his third week on the job, he travelled to London to meet with the World Blind Union. The hotel was full of blind people, he says. “They were getting around pretty much as sighted people.”

It is the same at Vision Australia, where nearly a fifth of the staff are blind or have low vision. “That is a very large component of the workforce.”

He cites a female staff member who has low vision and she told him of her condition during their second meeting. “She was doing everything just as ably as a full-sighted person.” He also mentions the case of Andrew Follows, a photographer who is blind. He told Hooton, “When you are walking down the road with a camera over your shoulder and a guide dog, people look. They just don’t get it.”

He smiles, “I am inspired by what I see.”

Hooton moved to Melbourne in January to take on the CEO role at Vision Australia, after seven years as head of ProCare Health. It is a permanent move for him and his family. “This is a sort of a midlife OE,” says Hooton, who was the first CIO of the NZ Defence Force and held senior IT leadership roles across private and public sector organisations across New Zealand.

Hooton’s career goes back 40 years, starting at Databank, where he was a computer operator.

“I never went down the programming route,” he says. “I was quite involved in the big systems, the big IBM mainframe systems.”

He says this provided a great grounding for an IT career, and he stayed with Databank for 16 years. His later roles saw him take on greater technology and business management roles that included computer operations manager for National Provident Fund, computer operations manager — then regional manager at Telecom; manager information technology and business strategy at the Western Bay Health in Tauranga; CIO at Countrywide Bank, before becoming the first CIO of the NZ Defence Force.

He held this role for just over four years, and then moved to ProCare Health as CEO. He is also a director of ChildFund New Zealand, which helps children in third world countries.

### Technology plays a major role in his current job.

“For our organisation, technology takes another step beyond what you and I might think of technology being an enabler,” says Hooton. “Mainstream technologies that are in today’s world — iPads and smartphones — make it so much easier for people to get access to information — a process that was complex years ago.”

“For an organisation like ours where one of our real challenges is to get as much information into print as possible, mainstream technology makes a huge difference,” he says.

For instance, one device designed for blind people is the Daisy player where a CD is inserted and it does a talking book. He says he is proud that staff at Vision Australia have taken the Daisy player (produced by the Daisy Consortium which Vision Australia is a member of) apart and put a 3G card in it.

One of the challenges for many blind people who are senior citizens is that they may not have the skills or desire to get involved in accessing the internet. “This device gives them all the information they could ever want more information they could listen to in a day through a device that is connected digitally through a 3G,” says Hooton. “They don’t need to know about any of the technology, it is updated every day.”

### Career trajectory

While progressing to IT executive roles, Hooton also gained some management qualifications, completing his MBA at Massey University, and completing the certificate in company direction from the NZ Institute of Directors.

The CIO of Defence role, with responsibility for a staff of over 200, was “wonderful and fantastically complex” job, he says

“There was a lot of diversity, it was a bit like being CEO of a small organisation,” he says. “It was a bit like running your own business.”

His first move to CEO was at ProCare Health, and for this he mined his experience at the Western Bay Health in Tauranga. “I was IT director there but then took on a whole range of other things like business strategy, negotiations for contracts and ran some service areas and that took me into the business world and allowed me to do my job as CIO a lot better.”

He says ProCare Health had to take a “big call” in taking the “top geek in a defence force” and employ him as CEO.

“It was a big call because the two jobs are quite different,” he says. “The common thread, apart from the obvious technical skills, is leadership and being able to work with people and get things done within the organisation.”

He says this is also a theme of his move to Australia.

The organisation provides a range of services, from training guide dogs, running blindness and low vision clinics and orientation and mobility training for people on how to get around. The organisation also runs a radio station and an employment service to help people with blindness and low vision get jobs.

### The accidental CEO

“The move to CEO was accidental,” says Hooton. “In some ways I wanted to get out of IT, to a small CEO or large COO role.”

“I haven’t come to Melbourne because I want to be CEO of a large organisation,” he says. He “stumbled on the job” when he was giving a reference check for a friend who used to work at ProCare Health and the recruitment consultant told him he may be interested in working for Vision Australia based on his LinkedIn profile.

He says the information pack on the job said the organisation was a “partnership” with the blind and low vision community. “At that moment I was captured,” he says. “It didn’t matter where in the world it was going to be. I wanted to come and do this.”

“I think all too often we make career decisions that are based around financial reward, prestige, those sorts of things. I am not terribly interested in that. I consider it an enormous privilege to come and lead this organisation. It does a social good for people, it is a great organisation, it is going to challenge me and I am really excited about it.”

“Those are the real things that you need to think about in a career, what is going to excite your passion, not what is going to put a pay cheque on the table. If you get something that excites your passion, the pay cheque follows.

“I wake up every morning just absolutely energised and can’t wait to get to work. Not everybody can say that.”

###  Trending now: CIO to CEO

“The CIO is uniquely primed to ascend to the CEO and COO positions in technology driven companies,” says Andre Mendes, CIO/CTO at the US Broadcasting Board of Governors.

The CIO has a “helicopter view” of the company that very few other people enjoy. The ERP, CRM and e-commerce implementations CIOs work on are “the entire technology strata of a company.”

“What you have is a realm in which the CIO is now very, very comfortable because they have had to implement enterprise systems in all of those areas. That helicopter view provides them with an understanding of the business at large including the external, the suppliers, to supply chain environments and downstream, the retailers and distributors.

“That provides unique fodder for a CIO to be an operations leader and eventually, the organisation’s leader.”

“The interesting thing about the CIO role is you find a lot of CIOs nowadays can do just about any other [executive] job in the organisation.

“They have to be innovators in order to survive, they have to be creative, they have to be exposed to all these different areas of the company.

“So would it surprise me to see a CIO take over a marketing department? No, because a lot of the marketing department is data mining and targeting. It sounds to me like a logical progression.”

Skills required for CIOs continue to evolve, he says. “The biggest skill CIOs need to continuously bring to the table is the ability to learn and the ability to unlearn, and also the ability to accept appropriate risks and to take appropriate risks.

“The moment the CIO becomes conservative in his or her approach to technology is the moment that CIO has a career at risk and potentially their company is at risk as well,” says Mendes.

“It is okay to be cautious but it is not okay to avoid risks at all costs. It is impossible — and counterproductive.”