

Coming Home – Ode to the Expat

By Kate Harper

The reasons for coming home for Australian expats are many and varied. It can be to give children the opportunity of 'being Australian' and enjoying a simpler, freer and cleaner environment to grow up in. For others it is to take care of aging parents and for others still, it is simply to reconnect with the beaches, the outdoors and the space. Many expats do move for a job but this is rarely a step up career-wise and comes about as part of a bigger plan to relocate for other reasons.

In 2009 ex-pat Australian writer Nicky Gemell and her husband Andy took the decision to repatriate with their three children from London to Sydney. In "Why you are Australian – a Letter to my children" she wrote:

"... I want you to know what it is to be Aussie kids, where playing barefoot is a signifier of freedom not impoverishment, where a backyard is a given not a luxury, where sunshine and fresh food grow children tall, where you know what a rash shirt is and a nipper, a Paddle Pop and a boogie board. Where you learn to swim that beautiful Australian Crawl and to smile when you talk; when you learn confidence and optimism and enthusiasm and reach ..."

These words resonated deeply with my husband and I when, after 22 years in Europe, we took the decision to return to Australia with our three year old son.

The challenges of relocating are not to be underestimated. Not only are there the practical considerations of finding a job that suits and that fits your experience, but also the emotional challenges of adapting after years spent overseas.

Prior to leaving London, a relocation agent earnestly took me through the emotional journey I was likely to go on and referred to the "W" curve of relocation. This generally applies when adapting to a new culture, which in her opinion, was what I would face after such a long time away from Australia. What is interesting about this curve is that it is not just a simple U where there is a dip and then an upswing once you settle into a comfortable level with the new job, friends, home and physical space. The W curve has this initial U but sinks again. Once you have settled, you start to rebel against the cultural values of your new country. You compare, struggle, debate and boycott, but in the end you do make peace and accept life the way it is. At that point the curve starts to go up again. Depending on how long you have been away, all of this, she said, can take anywhere from 18 months to five years. Now into our third year 'back home', my husband and I would have to agree that broadly she was right.

So what are the key challenges of relocating, and what advice is there to deal with them? At a recent summit organised by Advance (the network of Australians offshore) to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of International Women's Day, a breakout session focused on returning ex-pats. Early in the session one media professional based in New York exclaimed "I hear that you can't find a job, your experience is irrelevant and because we have been away so long our families will hate us!". Although somewhat extreme, these words highlight the main issues - finding a job, how to 'sell' and leverage your experience, and the impact of reconnecting with family and friends.

Finding the job

Many Australians would relish the chance to return but fear their chances of securing a good job are limited. This is particularly true of the 'stranded Aussies', those who have been relocated offshore by their employers but whose return tickets have been cancelled because they are so valuable abroad and for whom no position apparently now exists back home.

The prospect of finding the right job can be increased by:

Developing and nurturing networks: Keeping your personal and professional networks alive in Australia and developing dialogue with Executive Search consultants and prospective employers is essential. Invest time and if necessary money. Most of us started our careers in Australia and the clever expats keep their networks alive through regular visits to Australia and sending updated CVs.

Networks are also an important way of positioning yourself in this market. Once you are in the right one, (things still operate the old fashioned way) the doors will open.

Finding a mentor: A recent returnee at the Advance conference suggested 'appointing' a mentor, or better still two mentors (if you are a woman) who are tasked with helping to introduce you to the right people in the right network. At the conference, it was noted that women are not as good at networking or calling in favours as men. The appointment of the male mentor is therefore to ensure introductions are made to key people within your sector and the female mentor serves to introduce you to a growing number of influential Australian women.

Making a commitment to relocate: You will have a better chance of securing the right job if you have already taken the decision to move as opposed to acting on some half formulated idea of 'putting your feelers out' to see if there is a job available which would prompt you to make the move. What is important is to make the decision, formulate a plan, and execute it.

Giving yourself time to find the right job: If you are lucky enough to secure a job before you leave distant lands be prepared for a higher than usual chance that this job will not work out. Don't let this put you off (many do – 50% of all returnees leave Australia again within two years). Allow yourself another 12 months to find another one.

If you don't land a job before arriving then take a punt and come to Australia without the security of one. Although this feels like a high risk strategy it can be easier to find a job once you are in Australia and are demonstrating a commitment to life here rather than presenting an abstract voice on the end of the telephone or a face on a video conference call. You will also have the time to build up that ever important network and depending on your industry, to attend conferences, peak body events and thought leader and networking forums. Again, allow 12 to 18 months to find the right job.

Making an investment into your return is money well spent. Remember what you invested when you moved overseas and you need to invest again coming back. This could involve hiring someone to get you a speaking spot at a conference or simply paying to attend a conference and using that as a networking opportunity.

Selling your experience

Many expats find that their offshore experience has little value in the local market. Consider the following examples of Financial Services candidates; an Investment Banker who has spent the last 10 years advising Eastern European borrowers on how to tap the debt capital markets for capital raisings, and the Fund Manager who has worked within European and Global Equities but has no recent Australian Equities experience. The former has no relevant client relationships and the latter little experience of the dominant investment asset class in Australia.

Although it is a tight labour market, ironically, Australian employers are loath to hire offshore candidates (despite their appropriate underlying competencies) because they do not possess the relevant local market knowledge and contacts.

You can present your background in the best light by:

Relevant framing of experience: The experience offshore candidates have gained is not irrelevant but when communicating it to an Australian audience, it needs to be framed in such a way that it will have a local look, feel and relevance. This requires some deep analysis of the Australian market, reflection on what has been learned abroad and arriving at some conclusions that will open up discussion and thought. Rather than simply saying, "the European investor prefers this tax driven investment ..." greater traction could be gained through "the European investor preferred this structure which I think would be of interest in Australia because ..."

Playing your experience down: Once in the job, many are disheartened within a matter of months when they find that their experience is not considered relevant, nor is it of particular interest to their new colleagues and clients. Worse still when the 'tall poppy syndrome' kicks in, local resistance to anything that may be considered 'big noting' of international experience may be encountered.

Reconnecting with family and friends

A lengthy time away from the extended family can create challenges when re-entering the family unit. Although delighted to have you home, the family is accustomed to your absence and likewise you are used to living without day to day extended family responsibilities. As the family balance has shifted, the adjustment to your return can take time.

Interacting with former friends may also be tricky as with them there are now fewer recently shared experiences. Many expats therefore return to a part of the capital city where they will have greater opportunity to meet other expatriates and former expatriate Australians with whom they feel they will have more in common at the outset. This will enable them to keep the person that they were overseas 'alive' whilst developing their new Australian personae.

Professional help

So what can head-hunters do to encourage employers in Australia to firstly be aware of the wealth of experience that is coming from offshore and secondly to appreciate it?

Johnson is an experienced team of executive search consultants, many of whom have worked off shore and all of whom have worked for the large global firms. We ensure that our offshore networks are up to date and make an effort to track Australians offshore.

We also make an effort to educate our clients of the benefits of offshore experience and to emphasise the underlying competencies that candidates possess and how they may apply to a role within the Australian market.

We track the metrics of all our shortlisted and successful candidates. Not only do we track a diverse range of candidates, but we also seek appropriate female representation and monitor offshore candidates considered for particular roles. We seek where possible and relevant, to include an offshore candidate on all shortlists presented to our clients.

For further information please contact Kate Harper at Johnson:

*Johnson
Level 25, Angel Place
123 Pitt Street
Sydney NSW 2000*

P: +61 2 9921 3100

F: +61 2 9921 3118

E: kate.harper@johnsonpartners.co