

To Be Expatriated or Not? That Remains the Question...

What happens if you are living a happy life as an expatriate in the Netherlands and suddenly lose your job due to the economic climate? This was a rather unlikely scenario a year ago. Now it is a reality many expatriates are being confronted with. In this article, Nannette Ripmeester from Expertise in Labour Mobility will shed a light on the options available.

At first, the term 'credit crunch' sounded sort of nice, tasty almost... interestingly crunchy. Then it felt like overkill; there's that word again; "Yes we got it - there is a financial crisis out there". However, the next stage became more alarming... the results kept dropping, it became impossible to attend conferences, external training was out of the question. Pay rises were refused. Then suddenly there was a travel ban, presented kindly as an effort to reduce the organisation's carbon footprint. Next, there came the call - 'the' call. What family, friends and foremost you, the expat, had thought of as 'unthinkable', happened; you were in a foreign country and you lost your job. And what next? You may feel sad, angry, disappointed - these are all legitimate emotions and you need to get to grips with those first, but then the next step is to make a plan and start thinking about your options. Let's look at it schematically:

You didn't like it here much anyway > you feel relieved > you book the first flight home!
 You like it here > are you allowed to stay? > No ^
 > Yes > check the options below

- A** Do you want to become an entrepreneur?
- B** Do you want a career change?
- C** Do you want your old job back?
- D** Do you want an interesting job?

For option A you need to come up with a sound business plan - remember, in times of crisis, budgets are short at all levels, but bringing a good idea to the market can always work. For option B, you need to carefully consider your strengths and weaknesses. What gives you energy? Be brave and follow your gut instinct; in many cases, people do know what will work for them. And if you do not succeed, you can safely blame it on the economic climate. This article, though, will focus on the latter two options, and more importantly, on how to succeed on the Dutch job market.

The Dutch Labour Market in an International Context

The situation on the Dutch job market has deteriorated over the past four months, from a stable 2.7%, the unemployment rate has gone up to 3.4%. However, that is still considerably lower than the reported 9.4% in the European Union in June 2009 - the highest unemployment rate in ten years. The situation in the UK and Germany, with both 7.7%, and France, with 9.4%, is not very positive either. Neither is the situation in the US, with an unemployment rate of 9.5%. So, it may be a blessing in disguise that you lost your job in the Netherlands. Or as Ilse Visser, manager of Undutchables, a recruitment agency for internationals, says: "Although the Netherlands is also suffering under the worldwide crisis, the shortage of specific skills ensures that experienced internationals with the right mentality are still in demand."

If you really want your old job back, you may have to wait until the situation improves and your former employer starts hiring again. According to Lina Zedelius, Research Manager at Expertise in Labour Mobility: "Looking at the demographic developments in the Netherlands, this is a scenario that is not all that unlikely to happen in the next two years." Maybe, however, you will have to start looking for a job in the meantime, anyway. Not just any job, but a job that matches your skills and qualifications. For expats, there is one big issue here; the fact that you have been chosen by your former employer to become the *visiting card* of your organisation abroad does not necessarily imply that you are the best and brightest with a unique set of skills. You may have been simply the best person for the job who was available to go to the Netherlands in the first place. You do need to keep in mind that there are many other excellent qualified candidates out there also looking for a job. Yet, as a foreign jobseeker, you have something unique to offer: your knowledge and experience of your home country, language and business culture. The fact that you have



worked and lived in a foreign country will have equipped you with excellent multicultural skills, and now you will have to market those skills adequately and make your new prospective employer understand your added value when compared to that equally qualified native jobseeker. It is a challenge, but one of your best cards. The advice of Ilse Visser is: "When you are looking for a new job again, try to be flexible. Job titles do not always cover the job description: look further for other jobs that require your skills."

Back to the Boardroom

The economic situation has brought foreign hires and expatriation back to the boardroom. Organisations are looking again at their expat population and asking questions such as; "Do we want career or job assignments?", "Is business need or management development the key issue?", "What length do we require for assignments?" and "What about the fringe benefits we offer?" If you fall in the category of job assignments and your organisation has chosen to focus on career assignments, then you will not be too happy that these questions are being asked. But in the end, top level attention for international HR policies is a plus for both the expatriate (and his/her family), as well as for the organisation itself. Although you could debate whether people are 'assets', the required return on invest of an assignment needs to be determined. And, from experience, we know this is not always the case...

The fact that the economic situation has forced organisations to rethink their international HR and hiring strategy, also offers opportunities. Suddenly local talent is more attractive than the more expensive expat - and 'local' is not about nationality, but about where the talent is available. And if you are lucky, you may be able to negotiate a 'local plus' contract!

Solutions, Not Quick Fixes

Looking for a job in another country requires a thorough understanding of that country's culture. Even though you may have lived and worked in the Netherlands for some years, you may have never looked into the specific requirements of job hunting in the Netherlands. Have you ever realised that the open and direct approach the Dutch take in negotiations also works in their job hunting appraisal? Motivation, for instance, is key; to a certain extent more important than the tasks completed before. You may be aware that hierarchy in Dutch business life is generally not very stiff, but instead relatively flexible. Dutch people will easily ignore authority when they deem it necessary. This egalitarianism and openness, that so characterises Dutch society, is reflected in the horizontal structure of most Dutch companies, and sayings such as 'high trees catch a lot of wind' also apply when applying for a job; modesty is a much-appreciated quality. Have others sell your abilities, but refrain

About the author: Nannette Ripmeester is the founder of Expertise in Labour Mobility (www.labourmobility.com). ELM specialises in the communication between organisations and their expat population. Nannette has co-authored 36 books on managing and working across borders and job-hunting internationally, and has written numerous articles on the topic of globalisation and its effects on the HR profession. As advisor on international mobility issues to the European Commission and various governments, but foremost in her role as strategic expatriate consultant, Nannette has developed extensive knowledge regarding the skills that make people internationally mobile. Her expertise is about 'making mobility work' - and for over 15 years she has worked with expats, graduates, universities and employers to make international working a success.

from being too self-assured, as it will be considered boasting in a Dutch hiring context.

Remember that Dutch CVs are very factual in style, and only contain the facts and figures regarding your education and work experience. Nowadays many people mention the skills about which they know employers will be enthusiastic; Dutch jobseekers simply list these skills without weaving them into their CV. If you opt to weave your skills into your CV, be aware of the fact that a Dutch recruiter may not notice them at first glance. Given the fact that CVs usually get a 30-second once-over, it is good to know the rules regarding Dutch CVs. Considering the fact that Dutch companies are cautious and pragmatic about their strategy, you need to keep your answers sensible when asked during a job interview about your ideas for the future. Do not offer too expansive an idea for the future of the organisation, as strategic directions are based on consensus, and a step-by-step approach will work better. According to Ilse Visser: "Recruitment agencies in the Netherlands offer more than only 'pushing CVs'. Make use of the expertise of recruiters and ask for career advice."

And that is indeed the best tip one can get. This is the Netherlands - asking people for help and advice will work, but never ask people for a job directly. Remember the modesty thing...

Useful resources:

Expatica provides daily news and information online for expats living in the Netherlands, www.expatica.nl.

Expertise in Labour Mobility regularly organises expat workshops about settling in and job hunting in the Netherlands, www.labourmobility.com.

Undutchables - the recruitment agency for internationals living in the Netherlands, www.undutchables.nl

Publications:

Career guide *Looking for Work in the Netherlands* (ISBN 978-90-5896-058-0)

Randstad *werkpocket* (can be collect at Randstad agencies)

The Holland Handbook (ISBN 978-90-5594-6525)