



Make working overseas work for you

It's possible to work overseas for a few years to upgrade your skills *and* keep working your way up the career ladder. Just do your homework first...

For most people who dream about giving up their job and working overseas for a few years it remains just that – a dream. Once you hit your mid-20s, serious career-building usually begins, and hopping on a plane to go and work in a bar in Greece looks less like a viable option and more like career suicide. But working overseas doesn't have to spell disaster.

It's possible to move abroad *and* keep your career on an upward trajectory. If you choose your overseas job carefully – in an industry relevant to your career path, or in a recognised multinational – it can boost your prospects back home. Training in Europe and the US is usually more progressive, you'll have an opportunity to benchmark your career internationally, and a stint away shows key qualities such as guts, initiative and adaptability. And with new graduates feeling the sharp end of the recession, in many countries there has never been a better time to leave.

Yet South Africa has been buffered from the worst effects of the downturn. So should you rather sit tight and stay put till things pick up? Not quite. But you may need to rethink where you'll go – and what you'll do when you get there.

NEW DIRECTIONS

For a long time, the default destinations for migrant South Africans were the UK, Canada and Australia. But in the past few years the landscape has changed.

'Australia used to assign points to prospective immigrants whose jobs appeared on the Migration Occupations In Demand List,' says Susan Griffith, author of *Work Your Way Around The World* (Vacation Work). 'However, this list was discontinued in early 2010.' The US, always less than generous on the visa front, has become virtually impenetrable since 9/11. The level of bureaucracy in Canada is also 'daunting', says Griffith.

The UK was hit especially hard by the economic downturn. With high levels of unemployment and news that the British government plans to cap the number of work permits issued this year, most South African career coaches are telling candidates to put their UK plans on hold.

If you're still set on moving to an English-speaking country, Griffith reckons your best bet at the moment is New Zealand. 'It's a country that has had the most generous regulations regarding South Africans,' she says.

If you're prepared to broaden your horizons, there are plenty of opportunities in China, the Middle East and some of the new European Union countries. 'Poland and Hungary offer some possibilities,' says Nannette Ripmeester of Expertise In Labour Mobility, an international career consultancy in Rotterdam. 'But I'd stay away from Spain, Italy and Portugal unless you have a very [specialised] profile.'

Gulf states such as Qatar continue to boom, while Dubai seems to have righted itself after a precarious 2009. Corporate clients in China, India, Brazil and Russia are still recruiting. And the Netherlands – one European country that *has* weathered the economic storm – is worth special consideration if you speak Afrikaans, as Dutch is a very similar language.

Elmalize Greyling, a 26-year-old assistant financial controller in Cape Town, found it easy to make the linguistic switch when she moved to Amsterdam 18 months ago. What was harder was acclimatising to the corporate culture. 'People here are very concerned with their work/life balance. They work from eight to five and it's about how efficient you can be within those hours.'

But despite missing South Africa's 'innovative spirit', Greyling believes she has benefited from working overseas. 'I've learnt to be totally independent. Plus technological developments and new systems come into place faster here, so I'll be able to take new ideas home.'

JOB LOT

Greyling's job has been unaffected by the recession. But she's one of the lucky few. 'Job opportunities in finance and banking have fallen off very sharply since the credit crunch,' says Griffith. 'And the heyday of IT workers being courted by other countries is definitely over.'

So what are the new growth industries? Ripmeester thinks that, while the financial sector overall is doing badly, there are still internationally active roles up for grabs. Griffith says English-language teaching is 'booming', particularly in countries such as China, Taiwan and Chile. Right now there are also vacancies for bioengineers in Spain. And, of course, medical professionals will never want for work.

But the recession has changed things for everyone – even those still on the demand lists. Five years ago, professionals would usually prearrange posts before moving. ▶

Work permits

Every country has its own immigration rules. In general, work visas are issued for specific job offers. You can't usually apply for a work permit or visa on your own behalf, except where there are certain working-holiday visa schemes for young people and students. Instead, your prospective employer will need to make an application to the local authorities, and may need to prove why a local citizen can't do the job. However, certain agencies will mediate this process for a fee.

- ◆ Try www.workpermit.com or www.fragomen.com.
- ◆ Go to <http://australia.gov.au> to see whether you qualify for an Australian visa.
- ◆ Relevant information about the Skilled Migrant visa for New Zealand is available at www.immigration.govt.nz.
- ◆ Get advice and guidance on how to apply for a UK visa at www.ukvisas.gov.uk.
- ◆ For more information on working in China visit www.chinese-embassy.org.za.
- ◆ South African nationals can apply for a UAE visa without finding a sponsor at the Dubai Visa Processing Centre in Johannesburg or Cape Town. For more info visit www.dubaivisa.net/southafrica.

Your career

Indeed, the US used to offer an H-1B 'Specialty Occupation' visa, specifically for professionals with prearranged jobs. That visa has now been cancelled, and moving abroad has become riskier, with many people making the leap before they've secured a new job.

Megan White, a 23-year-old account executive from Johannesburg, headed to Dubai in 2009. Her timing couldn't have been worse. 'I got there as the crash was happening. It took me two months to get a job.'

White's elder sister had moved to Dubai two years earlier, walked into a lucrative post and made plenty of money. Encouraged, White had followed her, hoping to find work as a graphic designer. But the crash meant she had to reassess her options, and she ended up taking a job as a PA in an electrical company. She left after eight months.

There are clearly drawbacks to the move-first approach. But, says Pietermaritzburg careers coach Anna Martyn, it can also work out well. 'People are seldom offered employment while they're still in South Africa,' she says. 'More often you see people choosing good companies, starting off in low-end positions and then manoeuvring their way into their department of choice.'

Many recruiters won't even look at a CV unless the applicant is available to be interviewed in person. Martyn says you should give any prearranged offer a very beady look. 'I've had graduates get e-mails saying they've got a job in the US and that they just need to pay for their visa. They'll be sent an offer of employment with a reputable company's letterhead, with their details on. But it's a scam, and it happens a lot.'

APPROACH WITH CAUTION

Griffith has heard plenty of horror stories, especially from English-language teachers in the Middle East. 'The laws of some countries are not at all expat-friendly and employers have a huge hold over employees once they've signed a contract. Some teachers have had their passports impounded by their employers in order to control their movements.'

Others were promised huge salaries and fabulous benefits, only to get there and find the terms of their contract tell a very different story. And if you don't like your job, you can't always simply move on to another. In many Gulf states, your company has to be prepared to release you to your new employer, and negotiations are often based on Islamic law, not labour legislation. It's more likely you'll end up moving back home than moving jobs.

It's vital to do your homework. Approach verbal agreements with caution and get a written contract as soon as possible. (Be aware that even this might not be binding, however.) If you're heading to uncharted territory, go online and look at forums for truthful, fast feedback. And always run a quick check on your employers. 'If the company really exists, they'll have a VAT number in the country they're registered in,' says Ripmeester. She says you can check that at a local chamber of commerce in the relevant country. Sometimes you can do this over the phone but other times you need to do it in person – which is difficult if you're still in South Africa! 'Also check the currency you'll be paid in,' she says.

Certain currencies, such as the Brazilian real, tend to fluctuate. If you're going to a country with an unstable currency, Ripmeester recommends following Gisele Bündchen's lead and asking for half your salary to be paid in something stable, such as euros. (The Brazilian model has this clause written into her contracts.)

CULTURE CLUB

Once the practicalities are tied up, you'll need to get a handle on the culture. For every country there's a new set of norms. In the Middle East and Argentina there's a smaller sphere of personal space, so prepare to get close to virtual strangers. The UK and Australia have low power-distance indexes (that is, they place less emphasis on hierarchy), so expect banter between bosses and employees. On the other hand, China, Russia and Saudi Arabia have some of the highest power-distance indexes, so think twice before talking back in those countries.

Depending on the country, there will be differing rules on how to conduct meetings, wine and dine clients, and exchange business cards.

Life outside the office can seem just as alien. 'Once you start to go eastwards – to the Arab world, India, China, Japan, Korea – the culture is vastly different,' says Neil Payne of international communications agency Kwintessential. 'In the Arab world ... family and religion take top priority.'

If you want to get the best from your time away, you'll need to accept and respect the culture around you. And if you really cannot reconcile yourself to a country's cultural standards, you shouldn't go there.

A move overseas means plenty to consider. But ultimately, the most important point to remember is that whatever the financial climate, local employers tend to look favourably on relevant experience abroad. 'It's seen as a strength,' says Griffith. 'You'll have recharged your batteries and expanded your horizons. And it shows employers back in South Africa that you've got any wanderlust out of your system.' ❧

Useful addresses

- ◆ If you're interested in working in New Zealand, forums such as www.sagoingtonz.co.nz and www.emigratenz.org are helpful.
- ◆ TNT Jobs (www.tntjobs.co.uk) is aimed at the expat South African community living in London. The same company publishes a specialist magazine, *SA Times* (www.southafricantimes.co.uk).
- ◆ Go to www.kwintessential.co.uk for a colour-coded map of Geert Hofstede's Power Distance Index.
- ◆ Expertise In Labour Mobility (www.labourmobility.com) has guides to working in 42 countries, including China, Brazil and Russia.
- ◆ Visit <http://southafrica.info> for advice and resources for expats.