



Connect the dots when dashing around the world

Australians returning home from working abroad can end up feeling like Rip Van Winkle. While they have a fantastic time professionally and personally overseas, they sometimes find those who stayed behind have built up their local knowledge, networks and reputations to surge ahead on the career ladder.

Experts say the trick to coming back with more than just memories is to be strategic about where and when you go, and how long you stay.

For most professionals it is best to make the move after just a few years' work experience and to stay away for no more than four years, says Andrew Staite, executive general manager in Australia of the international recruitment firm Hudson.

Australian lawyers are one of the groups who should recognise the importance of timing. They are in hot demand in New York, London and the Middle East and can gain fantastic experience in areas such as finance, construction or mergers and acquisitions, Staite says.

"But if you stay for five to 10 years, you come back to find the people that you went to law school with are partners and you are on the waiting list.

"You don't have the relationship with the clients or the network to be able to pull in the business," he says.

While there are also many overseas opportunities for investment bankers, brokers and analysts, he warns, "Australia is a much smaller market, we don't offer the specialist industries that exist in some other markets. In each case you have to

Plan your overseas work stint to ensure it gives you more than just vivid memories, writes **Rachel Nickless**.

ask, will that experience compare favourably against local reputation and networks?"

Recently an Asian retail bank head who was earning \$500,000 a year plus incentives decided to return home to Australia. "They tempered their salary expectations and looked for anything around \$250,000 a year because they recognised their experience in the Asian market was almost too niche," he says.

"An exception to this trend in finance is those looking to return to the local managed funds industry, where global experience is very well regarded." John Coles, chief executive of the finance recruiting firm Executive Group International, agrees that working overseas can deliver mixed results for analysts, dealers and investment bankers.

"It's good in that you can get a pay rise and taxed at a lower rate, but some find it hard to get back into the Australian market."

Coles recommends working in Australia for the first three to five years before heading overseas.

"In most cases it's best to spend no more than five to six years abroad at this time, because there are more positions available back in Australia at the mid-level rather than senior level."

Sales people should also think strategically about when to move. Staite advises sales professionals with itchy feet to move into a leadership role either before

heading overseas or while away.

"Direct selling is heavily reliant on a local network and starting all over again as a sales person can be a demoralising experience," he says.

One profession where overseas experience, no matter how extended, is a good thing is engineering, he says.

There is significant demand globally, particularly in the construction, resources and energy industries. "Overseas experience working on key projects or investments will be very highly regarded. There's no problem spending five years in one region because the region is almost irrelevant," he says.

Accountants are also enjoying strong demand globally. "United Kingdom experience is held in very high regard by Australian employers. US experience is rarer but is still held in high regard", Staite says.

"One profession where overseas experience is good is engineering."

While the job is highly transferable, he warns accountants wanting to become partners in Australian firms face similar timing issues to lawyers, unless they transfer and return from overseas with the same firm.

Most recruiters agree that in any industry if possible it was advisable

to get an internal transfer with an existing employer to be assured of a position back home and continuity of employment.

Otherwise, Staite says, "if you are thinking about taking a role overseas, talk to the organisation you might want to be employed by when you get back and ask them how they value it."

Career management consultant Russell Johnson also recommends asking questions before embarking on travel. He spent 23 years abroad, where he eventually became senior vice-president of the a major US restaurant franchise, Arby's Roast Beef Restaurants.

"Coming back to Australia I found it difficult because I didn't know what I wanted to do," he says, adding, "Australia feels a bit parochial and small, it's like heading back to the farm after being in the big city".

He established EPR International 14 years ago to help other executives manage their careers and major transitions. "It's a matter of saying what career do I want to build and then working out how to get the relevant experience while working overseas, rather than just connecting the dots when you get back."

The good news for those stirred by wanderlust is that Australian employers are growing more receptive to overseas experience as the economy becomes more globalised, says Jonathan Wiles, national director of sales and marketing at recruitment firm Michael Page.

"Overseas experience is certainly seen as adding more value now than even seven years ago," he says.

KEY POINTS

- Many Australians find that an excellent job overseas doesn't necessarily translate into opportunities on their return.
- It's best to delay your departure until you've put a few years into cranking up your career at home.
- Don't stay overseas longer than five years unless you've got a guaranteed job back in Australia.