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# They Still Call Australia Home

Expats returning home are key  
to unlocking corporate Australia's  
competitive edge

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## About the study

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Commissioned by Indeed in partnership with Advance and conducted by Lonergan, the Returned Diaspora Experience study sets out to explore the attitudes of business and recruitment decision-makers towards Australians who have travelled and worked abroad and returned home to Australia.

It also sought to capture the job seeking experience of returned expatriate Australians, and those who are planning to return or have been unsuccessful in returning home.

The 36-question online study was conducted among 440 Australian expats returning or returned home and 331 recruitment decision-makers aged 18 and over. The recruitment decision-makers comprised both in-house and external recruitment professionals. Surveys were distributed to recruiters, returned and returning expats, and to members of the Advance database between April 29 and May 30, 2019. The research was carried out in compliance with the ISO 20252 standards.

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## Glossary of terms:

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**Recruitment decision-makers/recruiters:** Recruitment agency or in-house recruiters responsible for hiring employees.

**Returned expats/returnees:** Those who grew up in Australia, have lived and worked full-time abroad for longer than six months, have returned to Australia, and are currently living in Australia.

**Returning expats:** Those who grew up in Australia, have lived and worked full-time abroad for longer than six months and are intending to return to Australia in the next 10 years.

**Unsuccessful returnees:** Those who grew up in Australia, have lived and worked full-time abroad for longer than six months, and had planned to return to Australia, but didn't.

**Rebound expats:** Those who grew up in Australia, lived and worked full-time abroad for longer than six months, returned to Australia, then left to live and work overseas again.

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# Executive summary

**Australians are renowned for heading overseas to realise their career ambitions. Of a population of 25 million, it's estimated that more than a million Australians are living as expats at any one time.**

They believe that gaining work experience overseas is the other great Australian dream after home ownership.

Professional Australians from all walks of life pack their bags and head overseas in search of new career experiences.

Whether these men and women plan to look for work overseas, have been head-hunted or they've accepted an internal transfer, they leave Australia to further their career and have an adventure along the way.

And whether they stay for a year or a decade, many eventually return due to family reasons, to be closer to ageing parents or to educate their children back in Australia.

Armed with enviable new skills and global experience, these career-minded people start applying for jobs.

What they don't expect is for the process of landing work to be so cumbersome. In fact, returned expatriates quite rightly come home expecting to be snapped up by an employer thrilled to secure someone with international experience.

But the reality is that a lot of the time, businesses favour Australians who never left our shores. Our experienced returned expats, motivated to achieve greatness in a new country, are being overlooked by businesses time and time again.

## 01 Executive summary

### Recruiters roadblock talent

Australian recruiters admit they're much more likely to prioritise candidates with only Australian work experience, saying that this way they know for sure that their local industry knowledge is up to date (55%). Recruiters also admit that returned expats are 'inconvenient' to hire (40%).

Recruiters also value candidates who are familiar with Australian laws and procedures (55%) and understand Australian corporate culture or local professional codes of behaviour (47%).

So, these experienced returned expats are being overlooked in favour of job candidates that never took the risks they took to travel and work in a foreign land. And not surprisingly, this news comes as a shock to them.

Many returned expats continue the job search for months, while some suffer psychologically from the constant knock-backs, admitting that mental anguish and depression sets in.

They tell harrowing stories of recruiters telling them point blank that their international experience isn't relevant, or that their lack of local professional networks is or will be a problem.

### The job hunt

In many cases, they return and find themselves out of the job market for months, or even years.

Sadly, two-thirds (67%) of returned expatriate Australians have considered packing up their bags and leaving Australia again to secure their desired job.

And shockingly, a third (32%) of these returnees and rebound expatriates actually regret coming home.

The bottom line is that Australian businesses are sending a very clear message to returned expats — you are not valued back at home.

It's ironic that returned expats end up securing work through their own connections, despite recruiters perceiving that they lack local networks. Half of returned expats (49%) secured new employment upon returning to Australia through a connection in their own network, whether professional or personal.

The problem here lies in the recruitment process. Australian businesses and recruiters underestimate the degree to which skills learned overseas can be transferable across countries and industries and undervalue the skills and experience Australians have gained in roles overseas.

**Being inhospitable to returned expats is a decision that businesses take at their peril.**

**After all, the talent in your organisation is the ultimate projection of a business and can be transformative.**

**Be the change.**

## 02 Key findings

# Key findings:

Australians who believe that working overseas will be to their advantage when returning to Australia may need to think again. Research shows the opposite is true. In fact, they might struggle to gain work back home — and will probably have to take a pay-cut.



Businesses and recruitment decision-makers' unintentional disregard is effectively locking returned expats out of returning to the Australian jobs market. In fact, 65% of all respondents believe that Australian businesses are creating an environment that discourages people working overseas from returning.



A third (34%) of returned expats aren't even landing an interview for a potential role where their skills precisely match the job requirements. A quarter of returned expats (24%) are landing multiple interviews for various roles, and yet miss out on being offered the job.



While nine in 10 (89%) recruitment decision-makers consider that managing projects across multiple countries is a positive experience on a job application, a third (32%) of them are reluctant or cautious to hire a returned expat for an Australian-based role on the basis of perceived cultural difficulties.



## 02 Key findings

Three in 10 recruitment decision-makers (31%) prioritise a candidate with Australian only work experience, favouring their knowledge of recent Australian history, the political climate and culture over candidates who have been out of the country for a period of time.



A third of recruitment decision-makers (33%) think that returned expats misjudge their earning power in Australia. The perception that returned expats have a self-inflated sense of skills and experience is the most commonly held belief among half (45%) of recruiters, who think returned expats expect a higher salary.



The situation for some is so challenging, that some returned expats are packing their bags and returning overseas because their international experience is not valued (67%), or because there are fewer suitable roles in Australia (65%).



Seven in 10 returned expats (70%) said their self-esteem was impacted by the difficulties associated with returning to work in Australia, while a third (32%) of returned expatriate Australians and rebound expats regret having come back to Australia.



Shockingly, two-thirds (67%) of returned expatriate Australians have considered packing up their bags and heading back overseas again to get the right role.



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# Unpacked: The offshore experience

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**Australian professionals board planes bound for an overseas career experience that will give them a professional edge. They leave, confident in the belief that the risk and sacrifice will ultimately fast-track their career (77%).**

These courageous Australians leave behind creature comforts to pursue new career opportunities in foreign lands for new challenges, to broaden their horizons and gain skills which they believe will be valuable to future employers when they eventually return home.

These expats gain crucial work experience with international brands and manage projects across multiple countries. They overcome language barriers, work in developing countries and even in roles that don't exist in Australia.

Nine in 10 recruiters and returned expats alike (93%) believe returnees bring both cultural diversity and a thorough understanding of Australian workplace culture to the workplace.

When returning home to Australia, the majority of these returned expats (75%) feel they have an enhanced ability to communicate with people of all backgrounds, increased resilience and new problem-solving skills (69%).

They also believe that work challenges are far larger while overseas (70%).

Not surprisingly, they believe that this experience is worth something to employers back in Australia. Four in five returned expats (81%) believe that they're worth a higher salary than those Australians of equivalent years of experience who have never worked overseas.

Three quarters of all respondents (77%) believe career growth is faster working overseas than in Australia, and sadly this is confirmed as the reality when expats return home.



**Four in five returned expats believe they're worth a higher salary than Australians who never worked overseas.**



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## Australian expats are known for being energised, inspiring and fearless.

Leaving this country to live and work offshore is a well-trodden path to broadening career horizons - and in many ways it's a professional rite of passage.

Australians go overseas because their talent and drive earns them a place on the world stage. They follow their dreams, and this international exposure expands their perspective and experience.

As a country, we derive value and benefits from encouraging our expats to remain connected with Australia and to come home to share their experience and bring their intellectual property with them. This in turn fuels innovation and benefits the entire nation economically.

Businesses need to recognise the value of our returned expats and reconsider the contributions that expats make. Advance's large network can provide connections for returnees to support them into work, however government also needs to consider this demographic in policy development.

Advance holds its annual flagship awards to identify and honour the achievements and contributions of the very best international Australians, for the benefits of all Australian business. This in turn has led to valuable collaborations between the award winners and businesses across the country.

Meanwhile, expats themselves need to be prepared and mindful. Things may have changed in their home country in their absence. Events have taken place that have shaped Australia that may have eluded them, and returning expats may have achieved a level of seniority that does not exist here.

**But more importantly, we all need to remain connected and value our Australian diaspora and the contribution they make, domestically and internationally.**

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**Yasmin Allen**  
Chairman, Advance

# Home: Reality sets in

Armed with international experience, the best and brightest professionals eventually come home to Australia to settle down.

## Reasons for returning home:

53%

Family and friends



51%

Ageing parents



32%

Children can attend  
an Australian school



21%

Tired of  
living overseas



Most return home to be closer to family and friends (53%) and ageing parents (51%), while a third (32%) come home so their children can attend an Australian school. One in five (21%) return simply because they tire of living overseas.

They come home believing that their overseas experience gives them the ability to command a higher salary package than those who have never worked overseas.

But the reality is quite different. Nearly all (85%) of returned expats experience barriers to finding work back in Australia, admitting that it's in fact much harder to gain work in an equal or better position in their home country than what they held overseas.

Most commonly, they're told they are overqualified for a role (44%) and their lack of an Australian network is an issue (43%). Nearly half of returned expats (43%) say it's clear that recruitment professionals are unfamiliar with the international landscape.

## 05 Home: Reality sets in

Returned expats believe that Australian businesses are reluctant to hire professionals who have worked overseas. They say recruiters feel they lack relevance and that they're somehow a riskier option than hiring Australians who have never left.

This is despite the fact that returned expats have picked up new skills and are returning with strong experience managing culturally diverse staff (77%), dealing with multiple international stakeholders (73%) and being exposed to a variety of international legal and regulatory requirements (69%).

### Returned expats bolster retention rates

Returned expats are loyal employees, too. Among the returnees who secured employment in Australia after coming home from overseas, a third (33%) remain with their first employer. Of those who have since left the first company they worked for upon returning to Australia, the average length of time they stayed with the first employer is just over two years (26.3 months).

Despite all of this, a third (34%) of returned expats aren't even landing an interview for a potential position where their skills precisely match the job requirements, while a quarter (24%) are scoring multiple interviews for various roles that are not converting to job offers.

### Returned expats are told:

44%

They are overqualified for a role



43%

Their lack of an Australian network is an issue



And when they do land an interview, 16% of returned expats feel they're facing overly intense scrutiny about their overseas experience. Forty-three per cent of returned expats also believe that the recruiter making the ultimate decision on whether they land the role was unfamiliar with the international industry landscape that they've worked in.

Most commonly, returned expats are informed they are overqualified for a role (44%), and that their lack of an Australian network is an issue (43%).

On numerous occasions, returned expats are being told that their lack of Australian experience could be an issue, which is particularly common for those working in the financial services sector.

What the research suggests therefore, is that Australia is inhospitable to its returned expats and overlooks returnee talent, arguably to its detriment.



## As a corporate head-hunter focused in the accounting and executive leadership space, I'm not surprised by these findings.

Typically, accounting professionals go out and gain three or four years of external audit experience in a large 'Big-4' firm here in Australia and then, once they have become a professionally qualified Chartered Accountant, they seek opportunities overseas, often in the UK.

These young professionals usually gain international experience for as long as their visa allows, working in either short term contract positions while they balance some European travel experience along with their employment, or in permanent roles over a longer term. There's no doubt that this offshore experience allows professionals to advance their career quite considerably if considered in the right context upon their return home.

Eventually, they're likely to return to Australia — often for family or personal reasons, or inevitably their work visa has expired.

The challenge then often lies in the fact that their skills will have changed significantly. For example, if they've worked under differing tax and company laws in the UK (or wherever they've been living) and operated in a very different 'commercial accounting' capacity, they return with a vastly different set of skills than what they would have acquired in Australia. This shift does present challenges for Australian hiring managers and companies when assessing

these candidates. Hiring companies will have a very specific set of hiring criteria, which we as recruiters will be asked to use to locate a candidate matching that description.

As executive search recruiters, when we take a brief, it's our job to find the person that matches their criteria as closely as possible, not just the best person 'on the market', but the best person from 'within the market'. The perception from clients with returned expats is that the shift in experience while overseas may no longer seem relevant to the local market here.

Clients also have an expectation that 100% of their selection criteria will be met. It's clear that hiring managers are very risk averse here in Australia - they want the perfect candidate, and it may come down to a decision over two candidates with similar skills - one with a solid domestic employment track record and the other who has just returned from three years overseas contracting. All too often the latter misses out.

With all that said though, the reality is that it often comes down to the interview on the day. During an interview, and when challenged on their motivations and current situation, it's natural for returned expats to talk fondly about their overseas experiences. But this can be misleading and perceived as that they would still prefer to be overseas, even though they've now returned.

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Risk-averse hiring managers may perceive these job seekers as a flight risk, curious about whether they will ‘rebound’ and head back overseas again soon, if given the chance.

It’s my belief that recruiters — whether working in an agency, in-house or in executive search — should be skilled enough to quickly ascertain whether or not the candidate in front of them has the ability to do the job and meet the criteria as per the brief from the employer.

But more importantly, to establish the genuine motivations that candidate has for the future, to ascertain if the returned expat is here for the right reasons, has the experience to deliver the role and is the best from within the market. If so, they should take every step they can to represent the individual in the most appropriate manner.

All recruiters have an important role to play in creating a mindset shift.

If they thoroughly understand their candidates’ experience and suitability for the role, they can influence and educate their clients that a returned expat may well be the best person for the job.

As recruiters, we also have a duty to our returned expat candidates to coach them in such a way as to present themselves during interviews in the best light — focusing on skills, experience and achievements — so rather than talking all misty-eyed about their three years of European travel/working holiday visa, they need to assure us that they are the right candidate for the job.

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**Paul Simms**

Managing Director, Wright Executive

## 07 Industry breakdowns

### The surveyed expats worked in a range of industries, including:

- Professional, scientific and technical services
- Financial and insurance services
- Information media and telecommunications
- Education and training
- Arts and recreation services
- Public administration and safety
- Health care and social assistance
- Mining
- Manufacturing
- Retail trade
- Agriculture, forestry and fishing
- Construction
- Electricity, gas, water and waste services
- Transport, postal and warehousing
- Administrative and support services
- Accommodation and food services
- Rental, hiring and real estate services
- Wholesale trade

## 08 List of skills expats return with

# Expats are returning to Australia with these skills:

Management of culturally diverse staff .....	77%
Management of international stakeholders .....	73%
Exposure to varied international legal and regulatory requirements .....	69%
Management of internationally based staff .....	64%
Complex project management .....	64%
Global leadership and strategy .....	59%
Knowledge of emerging technologies/techniques .....	58%
International contract negotiations .....	50%
Management of multi-regional corporate locations .....	46%
Exposure to international supply/demand dynamics .....	41%
Management of ethical and corporate governance frameworks .....	37%
Management of international suppliers .....	36%
Management of educationally diverse workforce .....	35%
Management of large staff headcount .....	34%

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# Salary expectations

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Returned expats say the time they spent in foreign countries gaining international experience and perfecting their skills is worth more money, and employers should expect to adjust their salary package accordingly.



Recruiters who think returned expats expect a higher salary most commonly believe it's because they have a self-inflated sense of skills and experience (45%), while 33% of recruiters think returned expats misjudge their earning power in Australia.

Interestingly, recruiters who work in-house are more likely than external recruitment respondents to report that returned expats have higher expectations of compensation for higher living costs in Australia.

The most common reason recruiters think Australians with overseas experience are too expensive is because such candidates don't consider overseas tax benefits when comparing Australian salary packages (42%).

# Mission impossible: The search for work

**Four in five returned expats (78%) admit it's more difficult to get a job in Australia than they expected, despite gaining useful skills and experience while working overseas.**

Many begin hunting for work months before they return home, and yet 78% of unsuccessful returnees gave up on returning to Australia because of job search issues.



# 78%

**admit it's more difficult to get a job in Australia than they expected.**



## 10 Mission impossible: The search for work

### Stepping into lower positions

Returned expat respondents reported having a better position overseas compared to their first job back in Australia, especially when it comes to their level of responsibility (59%) and salary (66%). The seniority of their overseas role was also greater in 55% of cases — and half of respondents (52%) said they had more direct staff reports when overseas.

Among the returned expats who have not yet secured a job after returning from working abroad, many expect their last overseas job to be a better role than the first job they'll get in Australia. This expectation relates particularly to salary and seniority.

In what can only be described as a humiliating experience, 11% of returned expats take around six to seven months to find work, while 10% take 12 months or more to find work. Of those who eventually gave up on their job search in Australia, half (50%) had been searching for 12 months or more.

Of those who haven't secured employment, the biggest percentage of those seeking work are hunting for general management roles (24%), while financial (11%) and marketing roles (11%) are also common.

Of those who do gain work in Australia, more than half (54%) had much higher salary packages and more seniority (41%) in their last role overseas than their first role back home.

### Don't underestimate expats

Of those returned expats that have managed to gain a job back in their home country, the most common role to have secured is one in general management (23%). More than 35% of returned expats are entering workplaces with over 1,000 employees, while 20% will work in a medium-sized business, and a quarter (24%) land a position with a small business.

The vast majority of returned expats agree that Australian businesses underestimate the degree to which skills are transferable across industries (90%) and they undervalue the skills and experiences expats gained while overseas.

Again, the financial and insurance services industry workers bear the brunt here.

Sixty-two per cent of those currently or most recently employed in the financial services industry are more likely to have had a much higher salary package in their last overseas job, than the job they secured when they returned to Australia.

### With a little help from their friends

Luckily, expats have learned workplace resilience and effective negotiation skills while overseas. And while the knock-backs and roadblocks are debilitating, they're not defeated, often turning to their own networks to overcome the barriers to landing work put in place by businesses.

Half (49%) of all repatriated Australians secured employment upon returning home through some kind of connection in their network, whether professional or personal.

## 11 Discouraging industries

# These industries strongly agree that Australian businesses create an environment that discourages expatriates from coming home:

Accommodation and food services .....	67%
Manufacturing.....	56%
Public administration and safety.....	55%
Retail trade.....	50%
Electricity, gas, water and waste services .....	50%
Financial and insurance services .....	51%
Professional, scientific and technical services.....	49%
Arts and recreation services .....	44%
Information media and telecommunications.....	36%
Rental, hiring and real estate services.....	33%
Mining .....	33%
Education and training .....	31%
Construction.....	29%
Transport, postal and warehousing.....	25%
Administrative and support services.....	25%
Health care and social assistance.....	20%

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**As a global leadership advisory firm, Spencer Stuart is often asked by clients to identify top level offshore talent to fill senior executive roles where international experience and perspective is valued highly.**

It is also helpful if this talent is Australian, have kept up their Australian networks and stayed current on the local regulatory and market environment. Many returning expats bring larger scale and transformational leadership experience in markets that have already faced challenges we are now facing locally — including digitisation, innovation and regulatory change.

We do not generally see a bias to domestic-only experience. However, we do see remuneration levels exclude some offshore candidates. Where returning expats have personal reasons for coming home, these reasons may bring balance to these expectations.

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**Kerri Burgess**  
Partner, Spencer Stuart

# Returned expats head back overseas

**Constant knock-backs prove too much for some. Deflated and frustrated, some returned expats feel they have little choice but to head back overseas to find work.**

In fact, two in five rebound expats (40%) stayed less than a year before relocating overseas. The majority (78%) of rebound expats head back overseas because of job search issues, while 67% leave again because they don't feel their international experience is valued.



**40%**

**of returned expats stayed less than a year before relocating overseas.**

## 13 Returned expats head back overseas

Rebound expats also say they left Australia again because there are fewer suitable roles here for them (65%). Meanwhile, 47% of unsuccessful returnees or rebound expats say they have difficulties getting a job in Australia that matches their experience.

**These returned expats who are leaving are highly skilled professionals, too.**

Most returned and returning expats surveyed hold an undergraduate degree (52%) (Bachelors or equivalent) or a Masters degree or equivalent (51%), while 33% had industry-specific training or education that they completed either in Australia or overseas.

This means that Australian businesses are missing out on top talent in the form of returned expats, purely because they're underestimating how transferable the skills they've acquired while working overseas are.

Meanwhile, two-thirds of all respondents (65%) believe that Australian businesses are creating an environment that discourages expats from returning home.



# 65%

**believe that Australian businesses are creating an environment that discourages expats from returning home.**

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# Recruiters in the spotlight

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Recruiters and head-hunters are ultimately the gatekeepers to jobs back here in Australia, and this research reveals that they're making it very challenging for our best and brightest corporate talent to return home and work in a role that's equal or better than the one they were working in overseas.

Two-thirds (68%) of recruiters deem overseas experience to be irrelevant for most roles they need to fill, and half (51%) believe there's more risk involved in employing candidates with overseas experience.

Forty-four per cent of recruiters also believe Australians who have worked overseas are too expensive to hire.

### **Returned expats seen as disruptive and difficult**

Incredibly, two in five recruiters (40%) think Australians who have worked overseas are more likely to be disruptive to work processes and practices. More than a third (35%) of recruiters believe that employing returned expats is simply more difficult than it's worth.

Many recruiters perceive the skills and experience that returned expats gained overseas as less relevant, and the idea of hiring or even recommending returning expats for roles is seen as a risk.

Recruiters revealed they're reluctant to hire returned expats because of cultural difficulties (32%), and the most common reason for this was because recruiters perceive a potential delay in the returned expat candidate settling into their new role (17%).

Perhaps tellingly, recruiters revealed that returned expats are inconvenient to hire (40%) — due to the inconvenience of checking overseas references and because businesses are reluctant to do video conference or phone interviews.

Two in five (38%) recruiters also feel it's harder to 'sell in' returned Australians to final decision-makers — those leading Australian businesses.



**Half of all recruiters believe there's more risk involved in employing candidates with overseas experience.**

## 14 Recruiters in the spotlight

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**33%** of recruitment decision-makers are reluctant or cautious to hire a returned expat for an Australian-based role because of potential difficulties with 'cultural fit'.

### Recruitment decision-makers favour local candidates

Recruiters are most likely to prioritise candidates with Australian work experience because they deem the candidate's up-to-date local industry knowledge to be very important (55%).

They also prefer a candidate with Australian-only work experience for their familiarity with Australian laws and procedures (55%) and an understanding of Australian corporate culture/local professional codes of behaviour (47%).

Three in 10 recruitment decision-makers (31%) prioritise a candidate with Australian-only work experience, in fact favouring their knowledge of recent local history, the political climate and culture over candidates who have been out of the country for a period of time.

And despite three quarters (85%) of recruiters considering working in a developing country to be a positive experience on a job application, a third (33%) are reluctant or cautious to hire a returned expat for an Australian-based role because of potential difficulties with 'cultural fit'.

Recruiters won't even recommend returned expats to others. Four out of every five recruitment decision-makers (83%) are reluctant or cautious to recommend returned expats for Australian-based roles at all.

Despite this, at least two-thirds (67%) of recruiters have struggled to find candidates to fill roles because of skill shortages or a lack of relevant strong experience.



**55% of recruitment decision-makers deem a candidate's up-to-date local industry knowledge to be very important.**

## 15 Recruiters are reluctant to hire or recommend returned expats

# Why recruiters are reluctant to hire or recommend returned expats:

It's more difficult to check references.....	30%
They have limited Australian networks (suppliers, clients etc.).....	23%
Lack of familiarity with local jargon/industry speak.....	22%
Certain jobs require specific skills/training only available in Australia.....	22%
They are less familiar with Australian laws and procedures.....	21%
If still located overseas, interviews via phone or video conference is not favourable ....	21%
They expect too high a salary than the roles can support .....	20%
Overseas experience is not simple to evaluate.....	20%
Overseas experience is not relevant.....	18%
Lack of familiarity with local advancements in the industry (e.g: technology, newer processes/procedures etc.).....	18%
Potential delay in 'settling into' new role (i.e because of the big personal life change in relocation) .....	17%
Knowledge of performance of suppliers, customers, products and services is out of date.....	16%
The potential for them to misunderstand Australian corporate culture/local professional codes of behaviour.....	15%



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## A flawed hiring process means employers and businesses are missing out on skilled workers.

Recruiters are full of pre-conceived ideas about what a candidate needs to handle a job, making it more difficult for recruiters to identify the best talent in the global market.

In fact, there are some key flaws threaded throughout the hiring process that are clearly disadvantaging Australia.

Recruiters spend just six seconds making an initial evaluation of a CV. Their first mistake is looking for familiarities on a CV — what they recognise.

These are things such as which school the candidate attended, the name of the companies they've worked for and the titles they held.

There's a very clear halo effect that comes from familiarity. When hiring for professional roles, recruiters are assessing pedigree, but they're doing that all wrong.

Using familiarity as a starting point for assessing talent is an erroneous approach. Those patterns don't predict performance and don't correlate with the skills they need for a role.

And yet if recruiters see familiarities on a CV, they're likely to interview the candidate — even if they don't have all the skills needed for the role.

In the same breath, the more foreign these same sections of a CV sound, the more likely it will be passed over in favour of one containing more familiarity. It's unintentional bias at its finest.

Recruiters may even look for a candidate that has done the exact job in another company — also a problematic approach.

And finally, recruiters may be inclined to use their own professional experience as the benchmark when hiring — regardless of the role they're hiring for. So, if the candidate has worked overseas but the recruiter hasn't, that international experience may not hold the currency it should.

There's immense opportunity for recruiters in looking beyond the familiar and opening their minds to the ability and skills that returning expats can offer businesses and in turn, the Australian economy.

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**Paul D'Arcy**

Senior Vice President, Marketing, Indeed

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# The candidate hunt: Recruiters reveal what they want

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Australian businesses are locking out returning talent from the jobs market — with recruiters revealing that they find it difficult to evaluate the skills of returned expats and subsequently, admitting that they find it hard to ‘sell in’ returned expat talent.

Recruiters want candidates with a good local network, experience working on Australian projects, and a good cultural fit with Australian staff.

More than half of recruiters (55%) say local industry knowledge being up to date and familiar with Australian laws and procedures (55%) were a priority when seeking candidates for an Australian-based role.

Good Australian networks with suppliers and clients and an understanding of Australian corporate culture/local professional codes of behaviour was also important for nearly half of recruiters (46% and 47% respectively).

However, recruiters could be accused of putting too much emphasis on the wrong skills.

When asked about the specific skills and experience they recruit for, recruiters say the candidates they want the most are those with a strong knowledge of emerging technologies/techniques (44%), followed by those who can manage culturally diverse staff (35%) and possess complex project management skills (28%).

While nine in 10 (89%) recruiters considered managing projects across multiple countries to be a positive experience on a job application, incredibly, one in five recruiters (19%) went as far to say that overseas experience is not relevant when hiring for a position in Australia.



**19% of recruiters say that overseas experience is not relevant when hiring for a position in Australia.**

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# Returned expats do add value, recruiters say

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**57%** of recruiters agree or strongly agree that recruiting returned Australians has a longer-term strategic benefit.

Despite labelling returned expats as risky, disruptive and difficult, 81% of recruiters have hired returned expats for a role and 71% say recruiting returned expats has been a positive one. And more than half of recruiters (57%) agree or strongly agree that recruiting returned Australians has longer term strategic benefits.

This admission exposes a huge gap in the recruitment process that needs to be addressed by Australian businesses hoping to secure the best and brightest talent.

Recruiters did concede that a combination of overseas and Australian work experience is expected to bring better skillsets to roles every time.

They're also twice as likely to expect those with a combination of overseas and Australian experience to have better skillsets when it comes to negotiation, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and workplace resilience.

This positive sentiment towards returned expats perhaps indicates that there's a disconnect between recruiters' perception of returned expats, and that of the Australian businesses they represent.



**71% of recruiters say hiring returned expats has been a positive experience.**

## 19 Industry response: Asialink

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**Given the lived experience of many returned expats who struggle to find the right role on returning to Australia, it's encouraging that the survey results suggest that the vast majority of recruiters have had a positive experience recruiting Australians who have returned from overseas, while more than half agree that recruiting returned expats has a longer-term strategic benefit.**

If the experience is a positive one, it's important that it's discussed more widely in the recruitment industry and success cases shared.

What is of concern, however, is that one third of recruiters are reluctant to hire a returned expat for an Australian-based role because of 'cultural difficulties'.

Most returned expats will have extensive experience in navigating and adapting to very complex situations outside Australia and as a result, possess great skills in cross-cultural communication. These skills are as valuable and relevant inside Australia as they are out.

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**Penny Burt**

Chief Executive Officer, Asialink

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**The business community has a stake in the success of all Australians. Employers want to invest in all Australians’ futures by creating more opportunities and delivering more and higher paying jobs.**

We need the best skills and most talented workforce in the world, that means doubling down on economic growth and innovation to make sure the jobs expat Australians need are here when they return.

We also need an education and skills system that works for those who need to re-skill and re-train when they return.

To create the jobs that get talented Australians back into the country we need to build the right environment for employers to grow their operations, invest and innovate. Businesses already employ 11 million of the 13 million working Australians but getting the settings right for employers to grow their businesses will mean they can hire more workers, and create the right environment for new businesses to open.

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**Jennifer Westacott**

Chief Executive, Business Council of Australia

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**While gaining international business experience is of value to candidates and employers alike, transitioning these skills and experience back to the Australian market and securing suitable employment can be challenging.**

Returned expats first and foremost need to make sure and be able to prove that their technical skills are up to date and locally relevant. As with all candidates, if you do not meet the needs and requirements of a job description, you won't be considered for the role.

For example: if the returned expat is a tax accountant, they need to be able to showcase they know the tax laws in Australia. Similarly, Chartered Accountants can undertake a selection of local tax-based modules to augment their existing designation with local knowledge. Upskilling or updating these competencies before initiating the job search process is key to ensuring the candidate is immediately viable for consideration for a role.

Another tactic is to re-establish or grow one's local professional network. Building a strong ecosystem of business relationships can be invaluable in a competitive job market and can sometimes be the difference between struggling to find a job and discovering a back door to realising your dream job.

Based on our experience in the field, we often find that the context of the returning candidate can shape their experience re-entering the Australian market, particularly with regards to their level of titular and tenure seniority. Those entering the finance market at a mid-level, for instance with a salary expectation of between \$90k and \$150k and CA qualifications, will find work quickly in finance while those above this may find it more challenging.

## 21 Industry response: Robert Half

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Applicants should be informed and realistic about Australian industry standards and benchmark their salary expectations against the market.

In an increasingly globalised marketplace, international business experience offers its own set of distinct values that can be leveraged by candidates as a key point of differentiation from peers and competition.

A candidate's time abroad helps to develop cross-cultural understanding and other perceived benefits, such as communication and linguistic ability, global market understanding, specific product knowledge, improved work ethic, job satisfaction, and technical expertise.

We find that candidates who have held a long tenure with one international firm, as opposed to multiple stints across the market, can effectively demonstrate this skills development and are better received by the market.

Candidates should showcase how their time overseas has honed their soft and professional skills, and the value this offers to the Australian employer, throughout the hiring process.

Ultimately, companies miss out on top talent if they automatically disregard such talent, which is not ideal, especially in skills-short markets.

For companies operating in global markets — where trade and commerce take place around the clock with international stakeholders — employers should be looking for individuals who understand different working customs, with the soft skills, diverse professional experience, and adaptable way of doing business that is developed from working across different markets.

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**Andrew Morris**  
Director, Robert Half

## 22 Industry sectors for which recruiters struggle to find skilled candidates

# Recruiters report struggling to find candidates because of skills shortages or a lack of relevant experience in these industry sectors:

IT.....	23%
Financial .....	17%
General management.....	16%
Operational/Facilities management.....	15%
Sales/business development.....	14%
Research & development .....	13%
Marketing .....	12%
Quality assurance .....	11%
HR.....	8%
Purchasing.....	6%
Other sectors.....	33%



# Psychological impacts for returned expats

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# 32%

of repatriated Australians and rebound expats actually regret returning home to Australia.

Not surprisingly, the tough job search upon their return home is affecting returned expats psychologically. Being told that the experience they've diligently gained overseas is not worthwhile can come as a rude shock for many returnees.

Seven in 10 returned expats (70%) say their self-esteem was impacted by the difficulties associated with returning to work in Australia. Returned expat women (76%) are more likely than men (65%) to have their self-esteem impacted by the difficulties of returning to work in Australia.

By industry, returned expats in professional, scientific and technical services, are the most likely to have their self-esteem impacted by the difficulties of returning to work in Australia.

Sadly, a third (32%) of repatriated Australians and rebound expats actually regret returning home to Australia and shockingly, two-thirds of these returned expats (67%) have considered packing up their bags and leaving Australia again to get a job that they really want.

# Conclusion

**Australian businesses are sending a very clear message to returned expats — the experience you gained overseas is not relevant nor valued back home.**

Expats that come home to Australia end up securing work through their own networks, despite recruiters saying they lack local networks. Half of returned expats (49%) secured new employment upon returning to Australia through a connection in their own network, whether professional or personal.

The fact is that if businesses want to be highly competitive and attract the most highly skilled talent, a radical rethink on hiring policies needs to be top of the corporate agenda.

**Recruiters shut door on returned expats**

Recruiters have a big part to play here. Right now, they're underestimating the degree to which skills learned overseas can be transferable across industries and are undervaluing the skills and experience Australians have gained in roles overseas.

They shut the door on returned expat talent, and Australian businesses are missing out. Being inhospitable to returning expats is a decision that businesses take to their detriment.

In fact, not having the best talent on board is like trying to run a business with one arm tied behind your back.

## 24 Conclusion

**49%** of returned expats secured employment upon returning to Australia through a connection in their own network, whether professional or personal.

### Time for a rethink

It's time to rethink the way Australian businesses identify, interview and assess returned expat talent, bearing in mind that there's strong global competition to hire skilled workers from Australia, and respondents have told us they're more than happy to rebound back overseas.

Smart recruiters adopt policies that make the hiring process more objective. They conduct more structured interviews designed to eliminate intentional or unintentional bias.

Australian recruiters and businesses also need to adopt new testing and benchmarking processes that allow for more reflective assessment to determine how to assess best-in-class.

Alternatively, businesses could consider funding a trial project that allows candidates to prove they've got what it takes to win a place in their organisation.

Maintaining the current mindset will be to corporate Australia's disadvantage. It will mean Australia's best and brightest talent will continue to rebound back overseas in droves to countries that are willing to give them the chance to pursue a fulfilling career.

Ignoring returned expat talent is impeding Australian innovation, and it's time for a radical rethink about how businesses assess and hire returned expats.

After all, the talent in an organisation is the ultimate projection of a business and having the best talent on the market can be transformative.

## 25 Case study 1: Don Home

# The senior executive who couldn't even land a board position

**Name: Don Home**

**Location: Brisbane**

Don Home was offered a dream job that meant relocating from Brisbane to Chicago in 1995. The job was in senior management for one of the top 10 healthcare companies in the world, Abbott Laboratories.

He thrived in a variety of roles and rose through the ranks. With three school-aged children, Don and his wife made the tough decision to return to Australia in order to educate their brood in Brisbane.

Once back, he landed work as a CEO for three different companies developing cutting-edge medical products.

But eight years later, the family returned to the US, where Don ran a global business unit of Abbott Laboratories, developing some of the latest generation of medical equipment.

The buck stopped with him, with budgets in excess of \$250 million and Research and Development budgets of over \$50 million not uncommon. As far as he was concerned, his experience would be unmatched back in Australia.



Three years ago, he retired from his high-profile role and returned home to Brisbane, confident that something would come along.

While he wasn't expecting to land a role of comparable size or complexity, he was keen to remain within the biotechnology sector. He knew the industry was smaller in Australia, but he was confident given his experience.

## 25 Case study 1: Don Home

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**I thought my experience would count for a lot coming back into the market, but it didn't. Even companies struggling on the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX) wanting to enter the US market told me they didn't feel that they could use my experience. It was hard to hear.**

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“We were pretty well set financially when we came back, so money wasn't a key driver for me. I just wanted a role where my skills and experience would be appreciated.”

Don spoke to a number of Australian CEOs about his US experience but didn't even land an interview.

After 18 months of looking, he began exploring board positions to share his intimate knowledge of the US market with Australia's many global hopefuls.

He contacted several relevant companies, only to be told that his experience was not useful.

“I thought my experience would count for a lot coming back into the market, but it didn't. Even companies struggling on the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX) wanting to enter the US market told me they didn't feel that they could use my experience. It was hard to hear.”

Don admits that his self-esteem was impacted, and he reached a point where he had to explore different options. “I had to put my hand on my heart and think about what I really wanted to do. So, I bought my own yacht brokerage and now I run that here in Brisbane.”

Don desperately misses corporate life. He enjoys mentoring a vice president and two senior directors working in the US, who sought him out to share his experience and expertise.

And while the 56-year-old keeps his finger on the pulse of the local jobs market, he's accepted his fate for now.

His advice to others is clear. “Start fostering relationships back in Australia 2-3 years before you return because it takes a long time to break into the local industry.”

# Global experience in the financial regulation space, but forced to rely on own networks to find work

**Name: Caitlin MacLeod**

**Location: Melbourne**

Caitlin MacLeod spent seven years working with the Federal Government in Canberra before landing a dream posting in the Solomon Islands.

Like so many expats before her, she chased her career to London, with a scholarship to the London School of Economics to complete her Masters in Psychology.

She landed a plum role with the UK financial regulator, where she set up a conduct risk analysis unit, eventually becoming private secretary to the banking sector director in the middle of the GFC.

Seven years ago, she and her English husband decided to relocate to her birthplace of Melbourne to start a family.

Despite deep international experience in the financial regulatory space, doors did not open easily.

It was a shock given she was returning to Australia precisely when the banking sector was coming under the spotlight for regulatory anomalies by the industry watchdog.



The more she explained her skillset, the more she felt fobbed off by recruiters who couldn't match her exactly in a role using the client's pre-determined criteria.

"I kept getting told by recruiters that there were no regulation issues among banks here in Australia. This was seven years ago. Clearly there were.

"But recruiters just didn't seem interested in me. They said "We escaped the GFC" so my experience wasn't relevant.

## 26 Case study 2: Caitlin MacLeod

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**It is odd that as a country we have always rewarded people who come to Australia and are prepared to have a go as entrepreneurs, but our approach to professional recruitment does not reflect this open-minded attitude.**

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“I found recruiters very narrow-minded. Ironically, in the UK, recruiters were falling over themselves to hire people with Australian government experience and a strong academic record in any discipline. In Australia I was told I didn’t have Australian experience — my observation is that in the UK they tend to look at the whole person and believe the right person can learn the job, in the job.

There are plenty of bright people with Classics and Theology degrees working in the City of London.

“It is odd that as a country we have always rewarded people who come to Australia and are prepared to have a go as entrepreneurs, but our approach to professional recruitment does not reflect this open-minded attitude.”

She started tapping into her own networks, scheduling countless coffee dates in the hope of uncovering a job.

Three months after landing in Australia, it paid off and she finally secured a consulting gig with a boutique international firm.

“The firm is global - so they understood what I had been doing and as they were small without the hoops of a big bureaucracy, they could be flexible with a short-term contract that grew from there.

“It felt pretty gruelling as we were eating through our savings and living with my parents and I was really wanting a full-time job with security. Fortunately, I am still with the firm, so it’s grown into a long relationship.

“Ultimately where a recruiter isn’t prepared to think beyond the criteria, and put forward a left-field candidate, they are not protecting their clients’ longer term interests.”

Caitlin, 43, sends a clear message to businesses. “Be more broad-minded and look at someone’s capabilities with a longer-term view. Complementary talents and experience benefit everybody.

“Identical criteria lead to identical people which is a huge risk in any business. Your next interviewee might be able to help you face what is coming next in your industry thanks to their international experience.”

## 27 Case study 3: Penny Burt

# The senior diplomat who had her government connections questioned at length during an interview with management of a leading ASX brand

**Name: Penny Burt**  
**Location: Melbourne**

Penny Burt worked as a senior advisor in the Howard Government and spent two decades serving as a diplomat for the Department of Foreign Affairs before moving to the corporate sector.

Her first overseas posting was in Malaysia, marking the start of a long career in Asia. She served in a number of other Australian diplomatic posts including in Indonesia and Singapore, and as an adviser to former foreign minister Alexander Downer.

Penny has been involved in key international initiatives, including trade negotiations, that have shaped Australia's position in Asia and is a respected Asia expert.

She's been involved in the Bougainville peace process, the Kyoto Protocol climate change negotiations, and the development of Australia's policy on key relationships in Asia — from Myanmar to Indonesia and Singapore.

She's also spent time in the corporate world in senior roles, including at global management consultancy, McKinsey &



Company and as the vice president of government affairs for global payments company, Visa, based in Singapore with an Asia-Pacific portfolio.

While working with multinationals, Penny took on board roles with the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore and the US National Center for APEC, as well as the Singapore Institute of International Affairs.



## 27 Case study 3: Penny Burt

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**Stop ticking boxes to assess candidates. It's about having a different conversation to understand what their experience can do for your business. It's important for employers to think about the professional learning and development that comes from time offshore.**

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A year ago, Penny returned to Melbourne to be near her ageing parents. “It was fantastic to live overseas and have exposure to the Asian and global markets. I wanted to come back and use that knowledge in an Australian context.”

And while she's now settled back into Australian life, Penny admits to feeling somewhat disillusioned by the re-entry experience. “My journey was not a straight-forward one, and I've ended up counselling many others returning to Australia about how to handle the re-entry process from my personal experience,” she says.

During one job interview, Penny was quizzed at length about her connections within the Australian government, despite her CV clearly indicating she'd been in Asia for two decades. “I could have given that company a lot of assistance with its international relations and growth ambitions in new markets.”

Penny accepted the role of CEO of Asialink based at the University of Melbourne, where she's focused on the promotion of public understanding of Asia and Australia's role in the region. “Melbourne is very multicultural, but it's not yet particularly global in its connections or

outlook. Asialink is focused on driving closer connections with Asia, including for Australian business. It's a fantastic opportunity to use my knowledge and experience of the region — which is not necessarily the case in many Australian roles,” she says.

She says Australian businesses need to start looking at the whole person and the broader capabilities they bring to the table. “Stop ticking boxes to assess candidates. It's about having a different conversation to understand what their experience can do for your business. It's important for employers to think about the professional learning and development that comes from time offshore,” Penny says.

On the other hand, returned expats need to hone their skills when re-entering the Australian jobs market and draw on a number of them, including the ability to adapt, flexibility, cross-cultural communication, sensitivity and importantly, resilience.

“You need those skills in Australia as a returned expat just as much as you need them to be successful outside. It's also important to focus on building or re-building your networks and profile in a way that makes sense in the local context.”

## The business analyst with Asian experience overlooked for several roles because his skills were ‘unrelatable’

**Name: Tim Smith**

**Location: Melbourne**

It was early 2011 when Tim Smith, then 25, made the exciting decision to accept a position with a branch of one of the world’s largest legal firms, located in Hong Kong.

He was working in a commercial role in a law firm — a role that opened new doors across the world for the Melburnian. Tim worked hard and was promoted twice as a result and also grew personally through new experiences in a foreign country.

After four years, Tim and his partner decided it was time to move back home. He set up a number of appointments with recruiters, managers and industry colleagues and flew home to Melbourne for a week, securing a job interview during that visit.

Tim thought things were progressing well with the interview, so was surprised to learn he didn’t land the role. A relentless pursuit to land work failed, so he returned home to Melbourne on New Year’s Eve in 2014, jobless but happy to be home.

Tim moved in with his in-laws until his housing situation could be finalised. He spent his days meeting people for



coffee in his search for work, scheduling as many as three coffee appointments a day. This continued for four months.

“I thought the world was my oyster given I had been working with one of the biggest law firms in the world, but I was struggling to even land a job.

“Talking about it even now makes me feel quite emotional. It was a really gruelling experience,” he says.

Not one to be defeated, Tim focused his energies on getting physically fit, competed in a couple of triathlons and started studying a Masters in Agribusiness, which he has since completed.

## 28 Case study 4: Tim Smith

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**Recruiters, head-hunters and senior managers would just glaze over when I talked about my Asian experience. It was so strange. It was almost like it never happened. I learned that those four years were unrelatable in Australia.**

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“I had gone from being promoted twice in Hong Kong and reporting directly to my managing director, to being unable to get a job. Mentally it was definitely taking a toll and really affected me. It was quite a depressing time.”

In the end, Tim stopped talking about his work experience in Hong Kong when speaking to recruiters and businesses in job interviews, focusing instead on the limited experiences he had before he left Australia.

“Recruiters, head-hunters and senior managers would just glaze over when I talked about my Asian experience. It was so strange. It was almost like it never happened. I learned that those four years were unrelatable in Australia.”

It’s hard for Tim to put his finger on what made it so difficult for him to gain work. His salary expectations were realistic from the beginning and he had a proven track record in similar roles to what he was applying for.

“All I can put it down to was the fact that I had advanced quickly in Hong Kong, so I was applying for managerial roles when I

was 30. Perhaps I advanced too quickly for Australia’s liking.”

Finally, in May 2015, Tim accepted a contract position before he went on to secure a job with Asialink, where he worked for two and a half years in a partnership and development role. “I was so relieved to find an organisation that understood how the economic prosperity of Asia impacted Australia.”

Tim, now 33, is working with an asset management firm in a commercial role and while he doesn’t get the opportunity to work with Asian markets, he loves his work.

“It was four years ago that I returned, so while I’ve still got contacts in Asia, unfortunately I feel I’ve missed the boat on leading a project with an Asian focus back in Australia. It’s like my time in Hong Kong never happened.”

His advice to other young professionals is: “In Australia it’s very difficult to apply the skills you develop in Asia, so anyone early in their career should give serious thought as to whether an Asian experience will help them grow their career over the long-term.”

