

Senior Executive Recruitment - A Biotechnology Perspective

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Abstract

This paper presents the perspective of a specialist recruitment consultant. It can be argued that recruitment consultants and human resources practitioners are in the best possible position to comment on trends in expatriate migration, since they are dealing with the 'human factors' in the appointment of science, engineering and technical staff on a daily basis, and their livelihood depends to a greater or lesser extent on their ability to attract expatriates or offshore-based staff to jobs in this country.

Introduction

This paper concentrates on an exploration of the very important human factors that affect the decisions of expatriates to move from one country to another – issues that involve family, financial and cultural considerations bounded by personal time horizons, as well as the more recent safety concerns that have arisen as a result of global terrorism.

Role of Uncertainty

The role played by uncertainty in decisions of scientific, engineering and technical staff to leave Australia or to return revolve around timing issues. On the one hand, individuals are reluctant to leave Australia, fearing that their 'place in the queue' may be lost if they disappear off the local scene for any appreciable period of time. There is also an innate uncertainty revolving around security issues. For those leaving Australia, the fear is that they will be moving from the known into

the unknown, and many people are not accustomed to having to deal with such ambiguity. On the other hand, many expatriates have voiced their fears of living overseas, compared with the relative safety that Australasia offers. Such concerns have been exacerbated by perceived increases of terrorism, and there are anecdotal reports of surges in repatriation of expatriates following the September 11 attacks in the United States, with the Bali bombings contributing to the belief that Australia is a relatively safe country in which to live.

Role of Financial Considerations

When we explore the role played by financial considerations, it is clear that salary alone is by no means a key motivator for science, engineering and technical personnel. On the contrary, they are typically motivated by such factors as kudos, power, the availability of funding support for their research, and the accessibility of researchers to specialised equipment. While all of these motivators can be attributed to finance in its most fundamental form, many speakers at this workshop have underlined the fact that research personnel are the last ones to be motivated by financial rewards alone.

Role of the Family

When it comes to family issues, there are key roles played by parents, spouses and children in the decisions of individuals regarding whether to become expatriates in the

first place, and at what stage they should return to Australia. Parents can be a powerful factor in this equation, especially as they suffer illness with advancing years, and this emotional pressure is often keenly felt by expatriates who are sometimes made to feel that their parents (or parents-in-law) are languishing back in Australia with minimal support for them in their old age.

Spouses feel this isolation acutely too, and the problem can be exacerbated by the fact that some spouses are prevented from working in the country where their partner has chosen to base themselves. The appearance of children on the scene brings with it a completely new set of motivating factors, reinforcing the view that family is indeed a powerful driver for expatriates. However, the experience of recruitment consultants and Human Resources (HR) practitioners alike is that spouse pressure is an extremely powerful influence in the decisions taken by expatriates, particularly those relating to the timing of repatriation.

Time Horizons

As with so many things in life, timing is the key, and there are several well-defined decision points in the life of any individual seeking fame and fortune outside Australia. The first of these is the time when the recent graduate takes advantage of the fact that they have yet to put down roots in Australia by undertaking what has been described as 'the compulsory lap', where young people go overseas for anything between three and 18 months, typically taking a working holiday and 'seeing the world'. For those who marry non-Australians at this point in their career, the issues of timing and spouse pressure combine to influence that person's career for good. For those who have gone overseas at the conclusion of a doctorate to undertake post-doctoral studies, there often comes a time when they consider the pros and cons of continuing their international experience with the promise of ample funding and access to the international scientific mainstream, rather than returning to Australia - in many cases a return to no prospect whatsoever of a tenured position.

While there are many science, education and technical personnel who relocate during their career, it is very often the case with couples who have children that they face a decision

point as their progeny reach secondary school age. This is termed by some 'the Year 8 syndrome', at which time parents may take the view that they want to re-establish themselves back in Australia to enable their children to undertake schooling in the Australian system.

Again, there are many who are courted for positions back in Australia at various stages of their career, although the final key decision point will often occur when the person has either taken a package or has reached retiring age. By that stage, many are too ensconced in their offshore surroundings to countenance a move back to Australia, while for others they have always harboured the desire to retire in Australia.

Specialisation in Staff Relocation

The reality is that the decision points, motivators and issues are different for each person, and it is therefore essential that anyone involved in attempting to woo expatriates back to Australia needs to ascertain very clearly what the drivers are for each individual and their family unit. This is best achieved by specific, targeted questioning, which can elicit the real issues behind the decision-making processes of that person. While recruitment consultants and human resources practitioners are skilled in teasing out these motivating factors through such questioning, the role of specialist relocation consultants needs to be acknowledged.

This new industry specialises in professional handling of relocations, whether they be local, interstate or international. The relocation consultant begins with the same kind of questioning approach as used by recruitment and other human resources specialists. This questioning identifies the drivers for the person and their family unit, and the success of any ensuing relocation is very much dependent upon the quality of the original fact finding undertaken by the relocation consultant.

Some relocation consultants are so thorough as to pick up the person (ideally accompanied by their spouse) from the airport and take them straight to their hotel at the time of their initial visit, ensuring a positive and stress free introduction to their potential new living

environment. While the executive being wooed by their prospective employer will be expected to attend formal interviews, their spouse will spend at least a day with the relocation consultant, who will expose them to the key aspects of the new surroundings that are important to that family. For some it is educational facilities, others the availability of sporting, recreational, religious or cultural amenities, and the goal of the relocation consultant is to present their potential new environment in the best possible light. While this represents an additional cost to the prospective employer, there is no doubt that the input from a professionally-trained specialist can expedite the process and reduce the risk of a sub-optimal outcome.

In pondering the decision to return, whether or not they have been courted by a consultant, many may well discover on returning that the salary is greatly reduced and their personal tax is higher. Their reintroduction to Australia may not necessarily be all they had hoped for.

Income and Cultural Factors

It is important to differentiate between the income levels paid to local employees and the compensation packages enjoyed by employees of multinational organisations who have been expatriated at the behest of their employers. Local employees by definition are subject to local taxation, income and quality of life factors, while employees of multinationals are sometimes the recipients of extraordinary income provisions. These may include costs of private education in offshore locations plus a whole range of benefits that can never be replicated in Australia. While it is true that only a minority of science, engineering and technical personnel are employed by multinationals and have the perceived benefits of being on this ‘circuit’, it is also true that these organisations have tended to reduce the numbers of such employees, due to the escalating costs of maintaining them in offshore locations, especially those sent to ‘hardship posts’.

The culture shock experienced by such privileged employees on returning to Australia can be profound, and even for those who are relocating from local employment conditions overseas to local employment conditions in Australia, there are many reports of Australians

returning home and encountering far worse than simply a reduction in income levels.

The cultural isolation experienced by some returning expatriates is significant, and they are forced to realise very quickly that their colleagues will rapidly tire of glowing descriptions of the lifestyle they formerly enjoyed in Oxford or San Diego. This has been referred to as ‘the yawn factor’ and has contributed to the observation that some Australians are indeed threatened by the prospect of competing for jobs with internationally experienced and upwardly mobile expatriates returning to Australia. To make matters even worse, many discover that the ‘tall poppy syndrome’ is not the only form of discrimination which applies in Australia. Sexism and ageism are alive and well, despite the stipulations of equal opportunity legislation, and these factors can also make life difficult for Australians returning home.

Concluding Comments

With reportedly 900,000 Australians currently living and/or working overseas, the future prosperity of this country is directly dependent on our ability to attract people of international standing to this country. This is especially true since there are so many specific areas of endeavour in which there are well-described shortages of suitably-trained and experienced scientific, engineering and technical staff.

The issues related to brain drain finally have drawn a response from one level of government with the recent setting up of a Senate Enquiry. While the results of this Enquiry are likely to prove illuminating, and may perhaps offer some suggestions to both government and industry as to how ‘brain drain’ issues may be ameliorated, there is no guarantee that any policy implications will be implemented.