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Leo D'Angelo Fisher
Cold Shoulder Blues

Former teacher Jeremy Waters spent 10 years in London, during which time he set up a successful recruitment business. But when he returned home to Melbourne to get married last year, he found that employers were not lining up to greet him with open arms. "Coming home, I had certain expectations but the reality turned out to be something else," he says.

Waters, a physical education teacher and an elite sportsman in his own right, went to Britain in 2000 to pursue a long-held dream to play county cricket. That year, Waters, then aged 23, and a business partner started SANZA Teaching Agency to help Australian and New Zealand teachers find work in London schools. The business was so successful that Waters had to cut short his cricket career after a few years.

By 2010, when SANZA merged with Tradewind Recruitment, which also specialises in the education sector, it had grown to a \$15 million a year business with 32 employees in the UK, Australia and Canada. Waters stepped down as chief executive to return to Melbourne but is a director on the board of parent company ABACO Recruitment. Waters decided to step out of recruitment and start afresh in Australia. "Having started in recruitment at such a young age, I got burnt out," he says. "I didn't want to be defined as a recruiter. I wanted to do something else."

To his surprise, Waters got the cold-shoulder treatment. He discovered that he was not able to translate his track record as a business owner and chief executive in the UK into an executive role of his choosing back home. And he certainly was not going to be able to replicate his \$360,000 remuneration package.

"I took things for granted and presumed that things would fall into place for me based on my success in the UK," he says. In Australia, he found a very competitive – and sceptical – recruitment market.

"The issue I had was that, having been self-employed from such a young age, while having success in the UK and believing that I was quite capable commercially, it didn't translate locally. People didn't regard my success in the UK as kosher. The attitude was 'It was your business, you could call yourself CEO, you could put anything down on your CV.'"

Waters sought the guidance of a career-transition consultant at human resources firm Directioneering, which reinforced the importance of managing his expectations and focusing on the course he wanted his career to take after a decade in recruitment in another country.

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The answer was sport. Waters is now a consultant with the sport and recreation practice of engineering group Coffey International. He is also halfway through an MBA program at Deakin University.

“The biggest thing for me was defining myself, managing my own expectations and being realistic about those expectations,” he says. “My passion is sport and I am now able to combine my business acumen with sport.”

The managing director of recruitment firm Ambition, Paul Lyons, says many executives returning to Australia after several years away “arrive thinking the employment streets are paved with gold”. He speaks to “one or two” executives who have returned or are planning to return to Australia, mainly from the United States, the UK and Asia.

Executives who have experience in mining or engineering are in demand but returnees from other sectors “often find it difficult to find a commensurate job quickly or even at all” because of an oversupply of executives.

“Unless they have a specific skill, capability or sector experience that is rare, their lack of recent market knowledge and networks can make it difficult to break into the local market,” Lyons says.

Employers prefer local candidates, he says, because their experience is more immediate and more easily quantified. In addition, companies in a still frail economy expect new hires to hit the ground running: someone with a family to settle represents a potential distraction.

“My advice [to returning executives] is to be as flexible as you can and to secure a role, within reason any role, interim or permanent, to get onto the employment ladder. Once you’re on the ladder you can trade upwards.”

The perilous global economy has meant that countries that are traditional destinations for Australian executives are proving less receptive to overseas talent: they have plenty of home-grown executives to choose from.

In the past two years, the managing director of executive search firm Staite Henningsen Klein, Andrew Staite, has noticed a 30 to 40 per cent jump in the number of expatriate executives making contact.

On average, they have been away two to four years, Staite says. Most have been working in Ireland and the UK and usually they are cutting short their overseas stays as those economies continue to tighten.

The problem, in addition to the reality that opportunities are not much better at home, is the heightened expectations attached to their overseas experience.

“We often see people who have been repatriated to Australia with their current employer but with a local package which is well below what’ve been used to overseas,” he says.

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“Managing expectations is the most challenging issue for these people. Having to take a backward step to come back home causes frustration and they don’t stay long in positions.”

As well as coming back to lower remuneration, senior executives who have experienced working in my much larger markets and being responsible for thousands of people and big budgets find roles back home to limiting and below their recently acquired status. “Working in a much larger market has a way of causing some misaligned expectations but the reality is that in the current environment it’s unlikely they will step into a parallel or equivalent role in Australia,” Staite says.

Executives returning home on their own steam often find they lack the local networks to be able to step into a role.

Staite says senior executives who have worked in communications, marketing and sales roles overseas are finding that in a softer local market, a current contact book can be the factor that clinches the job for a local candidate.

He recommends that executives working overseas use social media to maintain networks and in particular to maintain contact with trusted peers and mentors to keep abreast of industry intelligence. They should also be in contact with recruiters well before their planned return. But the reality remains, he cautions, that in the current market “it’s very hard to secure a job when you’re sitting on the other side of the world”.

The managing director of executive search firm DH International, Darren Challis, is more upbeat about the prospects of returning expatriate executives. ‘We find that clients love returning expatriates particularly if they have experience in relevant markets,’ he says.

Returning executives with exposure to Asia, particularly those with experience in supply chain and procurement roles, are in demand with Australian companies expanding into Asia or outsourcing business processes to the region.

However, Challis agrees that some returning executives are finding it difficult to land on their feet, usually because of unrealistic expectations or a lack of comparable opportunities.

“There will be some markets that just don’t exist in Australia; Australia is a relatively small market and there is sometimes not the scale and scope of roles that exist in other markets,” Challis says. “It’s a word of counsel that we do need to share with returning expats, that if you want to return home you may need to make some trade-offs.”

And then there’s hubris. “Sometimes, there are expats who return home and have a sense of entitlement that ‘if they can make it overseas, they’ll make it anywhere’ but my counsel to returning executives is that hiring organisations can find that attitude to be a turn-off.”

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Heather Parkinson, associate director at Melbourne-based human resources consultant Directioneering, says “deep planning”, rather than over-inflated expectations, is the key to a successful transition back to Australia. Ideally, she says, returning expats should be planning their comeback 18 months in advance. “Managing careers in a global context needs extensive planning,” Parkinson says. “By the time the executive is preparing to physically come home, it’s too late to do this work.”

Plan your comeback

- **Develop a bridging strategy:** The transition home has two stages-preparing to come home and then facing reality on return. The best advice is to complete a to-do list for securing your next role. Work out what can be done to further your career now and what must wait until you return. The more you can do before you land the better.
- **Know what you stand for:** Executives tend to assume that their international experience will automatically make them in demand. Assume nothing. What have you added to your skills while you were away? Be clear about what’s in your toolkit and how you add value in the local market.
- **Secure relevant champions:** A network of champions to support placement in the next role is essential. Even if you and your organisation hope there will be an internal spot for you when you return, you need to secure relevant internal and external support in your industry. Stay in touch with executive search firms and keep up to date on the market.
- **Stay connected:** Absence does not make the heart grow fonder. People do forget about you when you are away. While technology offers ways of staying in touch, it’s not the same as face-to-face contact. If there is time for personal meetings with key contacts at home, make a brief trip.