

Skills still king

GLOBAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES ARE STILL AVAILABLE FOR THOSE WITH THE NECESSARY SKILLS.

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(t) The recent downturn in global markets will have more far reaching affects than people realise. We are already seeing evidence of Governments

tightening the immigration controls and entry qualification criteria regarding residency and work permits to protect local job opportunities in a shrinking economy. Foreigners working in these countries on work permits will have difficulty renewing the temporary permits which generally operate on a one- or two-year basis.

We predict that countries which have a strong social system will be worst affected as nationals from these countries working abroad might have to return to their home country as a consequence. The trend will become more evident over the next 12 to 18 months as the work permits affected will expire during this period.

Dubai has been severely affected by the global meltdown in financial markets and an economic growth rate of only around 1.5% to 2% is expected for 2009. As a result of the downturn in the property sector, scores of projects have been cancelled, resulting in thousands of job losses.

Until recently, many of the world's top construction experts were working on projects in Dubai and many of these projects have been curtailed and new work cancelled. This has resulted in a steady exodus of these skills from Dubai. We have not yet seen an influx

of South Africans returning to South Africa. There are numerous reasons for this. For those who have emigrated with their families it is a very expensive exercise to return to South Africa; and many of these individuals may still be investigating their long-term options in other foreign markets before considering returning home.

The contraction of employment opportunities in countries such as Dubai, the UK and Australia presents South African employers, industry and government with an opportunity to selectively target and encourage skilled South Africans who are working abroad, who are able to assist with skills transfer and transformation to return to South Africa.

Good news is that while thousands of jobs have been lost worldwide, the economies of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Abu Dhabi, are still largely intact. Saudi Arabia expects an economic growth rate of around 5.5% this year, Qatar a growth rate of around 5% and Abu Dhabi, an economic growth rate of around 7%.

Unlike Dubai, these countries have petroleum-based economies. Unlike Dubai, they have also embraced Shariah Compliant Finance. This results in a more cautious and regulated approach to access credit finance, which has benefited these economies and appears to have protected and isolated them for the financial meltdown in credit markets.

There is an opportunity for South Africans to find employment in these three countries. The attractive part for South Africans is that remuneration is tax free. The lifestyle is attractive: foreigners live in compounds, similar to estate living in South Africa. Private, international schooling for children is also excellent. Several South Africans are already on their third or fourth work permit.

Demand for SA skills is high: South Africans have always been highly sought after as employees because of

their work ethic, their qualifications and their work experience.

Three or four years ago, South Africans were comparatively cheap to recruit. They are now paid on par with their European, Australian or Canadian counterparts. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Abu Dhabi have quota systems where targets have been set in terms of how many foreigners are allowed into the country. Targets have also been set per nationality.

Of interest to South Africans is that all three countries have exceeded their quota for Indian foreigners. They are looking for white and blue collar workers. This presents an opportunity for more South Africans, from different work levels, to work in these countries. In the past, only highly skilled professionals were recruited.

It is important to recognise that these countries have a very different approach to labour from South Africa. There are no unions in the work environment nor are there any consultative committees. On entering the country, an employee is required to surrender his passport to his employer. These are only returned at the end of his contract.

Foreign women are not generally allowed to work in Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent in Qatar. The latter is, however, quite prescriptive in terms of the types of work environments that women can work in. They are not comfortable with a woman working in a male dominated team. It is, however, possible to obtain work permits for women based on their technical expertise and special skills.

Despite the meltdown in global financial markets, one's marketability in the workplace is still based on one's skills, knowledge and expertise. It is imperative, therefore, to continue to enhance one's skills, qualifications and experience. This will make you more marketable. It will also enable you to swim in a much bigger pond.

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