

The Herald Sun

Hopes for Australian business

By Olga Galacho

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A FIRST-EVER survey of skilled Australians working overseas could dispel concerns about the 'brain drain' by revealing how these special exports can help Australian business.

Advance, the New York-based association for Australian professionals around the world, believes expats should not be counted as a cost to the economy, but as an asset that local enterprises can use to build their businesses offshore.

Advance teamed up with expatriate advocacy group Southern Cross Group to conduct last month's mini-census in 50 countries.

About 16,000 expats responded to more than 40 questions covering issues such as motivations for living abroad, plans to return, finances and assets, the nature of their work and attitudes to voting and Australian taxation.

It is the most comprehensive study of Australian expatriates ever undertaken and will produce a snapshot of how they play a growing role in the economic future of the nation.

Eminent demographics specialist Professor Graeme Hugo, of Adelaide University, is expected to announce the survey's findings as soon as he completes an analysis of the data.

According to the Federal Government, 113,030 skilled people left Australia last year compared with 170,260 skilled arrivals.

Despite the statistics, employer groups say they are struggling to fill jobs across a wide range of professions.

They warn that the skills shortage threatens Australia's competitive viability in the global arena and subsequently could lead to a domestic economic downturn.

The Business Council of Australia has urged government and business to ensure there are not unnecessary barriers to expats returning.

"While not wanting to discourage Australians from seeking opportunities overseas government and business need to focus on making it as attractive and easy as possible for the return of our most talented workers," BCA chief economist Melinda Cilento said.

She added that many Australians were dissuaded from returning by our high taxes on their repatriated savings.

Professor Hugo told Business Daily that while Australia needed to continue importing skilled labour to satisfy current workforce shortages, the nation's economic sustainability would be enhanced by not writing off expats.

"We should be using every possible incentive to attract these people back," he said.

"What better type of migrant than one who was born here and identifies with Australia."

Last week, the Victorian Endowment for Science, Knowledge and Innovation (VESKI) announced it had enticed two Australian research scientists to return after granting them fellowships that would allow them to continue their ground-breaking work here.

Protein expert Dr Cait MacPhee and parasitology researcher Dr Alyssa Barry were lured back after years of working at top UK and US universities.

VESKI executive director Julia Page said the organisation was set up by the State Government in 2003 with an endowment fund of \$10 million to help identify outstanding Australian expats and entice them home.

It has already funded the repatriation of three other leading scientists.

Advance director Katherine O'Regan told Business Daily that while it may not be possible to retrieve Australian talent in other fields in the same way, those expats could still add value to our economy from afar.

Dubbed the One Million More study, Advance's survey is expected to underline the "extreme patriotism" felt by expats, even if they had lived away for many years.

"There are more than one million Australians living overseas and the study will help policy makers and businesses tap into that patriotism and use it in an ambassadorial role," Ms O'Regan said.

"We hope the findings will help Australian employers understand the mobility of Australian talents, especially at the top.

"We aren't going to be able to stop people going overseas, but we could be asking ourselves how can we use the diaspora."

As the world of borderless business transactions grows, expats are well placed to act as conduits to bring economic value to Australian businesses, she said.

"They may be able to act as middlemen between Australian businesses and overseas markets by using their foreign networks for introductions, for instance."

Ms O'Regan said she expected the survey results to show that the major reason professionals leave Australia is because they want to enhance their skills and expose themselves to an international experience.

Ahead of the findings being handed down, Business Daily asked a group of expatriates why they choose to work offshore.

BELINDA ABBOTT, 28, ACCOUNTANT, DELOITTE, LONDON

The experience I am gaining here has definitely expanded my skills base.

I would not have had the opportunity to work on the diversity of projects and transactions that I have been involved with here back in Australia in such a short period of time.

The pay obviously helps, both for when I return to Australia and for my travel adventures. The wages here are to be taken advantage of.

I have heard some expats comment on the lack of choice of higher level management roles in Australia with reasonable salary packages.

ANDREW BRETT, 46, IT MANAGER, SOFT CONTROL, BANGKOK

Foreigners working here tend to be more in the management area so I've had to develop that part of my skills quite quickly.

Also the foreign community here is very diverse so I'm dealing with people from all over the world on a daily basis -- far more than would be usual in Australia. That constantly gives me the opportunity to learn from a whole range of different perspectives. Broadens the mind and all that sort of thing.

JIM BATTEN, 50, IT SPECIALIST, KANBAY, ATLANTA

The myriad of opportunities you come across far outweigh the insecurity of giving up all you have.

When I left Australia, I was earning about \$13,000 a year. Now I earn about \$175,000. I have a large superannuation plan in the US.

It would be a hassle living somewhere else given that most of my money is tied up here and untouchable until I retire. So there are some obstacles to returning to Australia.

MORGAN TOCKER, 22, DATABASE ADMINISTRATOR, MYSQL, BANGKOK

I wanted to increase my exposure to high-speed technology, and with no big IT firms in Australia that was going to be restricted if I didn't move overseas. Of the top 500 fastest computer systems in the world, there are only two or three in Australia.

Also, because IT teams are bigger here, I have the ability to specialise and to take holidays when I want to, because there is always someone else with the skills to fill in for me when I am away.

MEREDITH ABBOTT, 37, ACCOUNTANT, IBM, MOSCOW

We moved to Russia because of my husband's promotion and our desire to live in a fast-growth, developing market. I think the personal benefits outweigh the career benefits for me. We have also worked in France and Finland and it has been very lucrative.

We have some significant investments and plan to retire from paid work in a couple of years and focus on doing volunteer work in the Third World.

We feel the time is drawing close when we want to be givers rather than takers.

CAMERON BARNARD, 26, MEDICAL INSTRUMENTS ENGINEER, M2M, NEW YORK

I was headhunted for my current job and a few months later was posted to the US. American employers tend to treat staff fairly well with things you don't get in Australia, like options schemes, health plans and big bonuses.

And tax rates in Australia are relatively obscene compared to many other parts of the world.

Broadly speaking, in my industry, health care, it is fair to say the demand curve for skills is always up and to the right.

And the simple fact is that in many industries, New York is seen as the pinnacle. Plus I also intend to start my MBA here.

RON HACKNEY, 34, GEOPHYSICIST, KIEL UNIVERSITY, GERMANY

I first moved to Berlin, then Kiel because I wanted to get to know some of my mother's family, who still live in Germany.

And as a scientist it is a good idea to spend some time overseas to make new contacts, broaden your experience and exposure to different ways of thinking and different sources of inspiration. I have picked up new skills and believe overseas experience in my field is valued in Australia.

Originally, I was going to return to Australia after a couple of years, but then the opportunities here just kept coming.