

# Weekend Professional



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## Other side of 'think local'

*Demanding 'local experience' doesn't guarantee the best person for the job, writes Karalyn Brown*

**B**ILL Gates wouldn't get a job in Australia because he has no local experience," says Ailis Logan, the founder of Tribus Lingua, a consultancy assisting skilled migrants find jobs. Logan is only half joking. She believes that Australian employers value local experience much more than their counterparts in Europe and the US.

For the many overseas professionals enticed here by the lure of a bountiful job market, the difficulty of finding a job without local experience is no joke.

What does "no local experience" really mean? Are we so parochial that we'd reject Bill Gates if he sent us his resume? Do we run our businesses in a uniquely Australian way? Many of us will go overseas to work, valuing the career and life experience we bring back — yet we appear to view the experience that others bring here with suspicion.

Ian Little, the author of *Project Australia: Land that Engineering Job in Australia*, suggests our geographic isolation has contributed to our conservatism. As the senior engineering manager at engineering giant Worely Parsons, he's hired many overseas professionals. He believes that a lack of Australian experience is actually the biggest barrier any newcomer will face. Employers appear worried about the communication skills of skilled immigrants.

Poorly written resumes from overseas professionals may fuel employers' doubts about immigrants' communication skills. Little and Logan say they see many bad resumes from recent arrivals. This makes it harder for employers to assess overseas experience. Logan recommends that newcomers provide context around places they've worked, including the challenges and drivers of the businesses they've worked in. It can be difficult to read a resume in isolation of preconceived ideas about a nationality.

It would be naive to suggest that people never discriminate, but Little certainly doesn't believe many Australians are inherently racist. When it comes to hiring he thinks Australian employers are just risk-averse. "People will still encounter difficulties when they want to switch industries," he says. "Employers don't realise how tough times are, and they need to get flexible."

But even if everyone spoke English, misunderstandings about meanings can be common. Logan suggests our easy-going expressions can easily confuse newcomers. "Australians appear casual, but are not casual at all," she says. "'Come in for a chat' can mean a formal interview, so you need to be prepared."

But perhaps there's more going on than verbal confusion. Body language plays its part in defining meaning and each culture uses this differently. Aparna Hebbani, an academic and researcher into intercultural communication in interviews at the University of Queensland says "non-verbals" such as a handshake and eye contact contribute to an estimated 66 per cent of meaning in social interaction.

She's seen many cross-cultural misunderstandings in an interview. "If an Indian interviewee, for example, does not make 'appropriate' levels of eye contact with an Australian interviewer, they can interpret that as a lack of confidence or not being truthful," she says. "But the interviewee might not look into the interviewer's eye out of respect."

The way different cultures see interviews may be detrimental to their chances of success. Little claims some have a "servant attitude" when it comes to marketing their skills. "An employment contract is a two-way thing. I've not seen many overseas professionals who understand that," he says. "They don't understand that they have something to offer."

Confused communication aside, what are other risks in recruiting a newcomer? Logan



**Battle:** Lack of a local track record can be the biggest hurdle a newcomer faces, says Ian Little

and Little say that new arrivals need to understand Australian law, regulations and codes plus the general rules of Australian business practice. But Little suggests in engineering that employers' perception that newcomers can't adapt is greater than reality. "Engineering is an applied science — the laws of science do not change," he says.

In some professions the local learning curve is steeper and longer. Accounting is one example. David Smith, a former partner of accounting firm PKF and ex-president of the Institute of Chartered Accountants, runs Smithink, a management consultancy advising accountants. He sees the employers' concern

over communication skills of immigrants and their ability to understand the highly complex Australian tax system and superannuation laws as major barriers for accountants new to Australia.

Logan says overseas professionals need to understand that the structure of the Australian economy is "old-fashioned", with up to 70 per cent of businesses classified small-medium.

The accounting industry reflects this statistic. Smith suggests a typical small-business accounting firm will find it hard to embrace new arrivals who cannot hit the ground running. Small firms struggle to verify skills, have limited resources for training and perhaps

less patience for the newcomer under pressure.

There are other barriers that make it difficult for newcomers to find jobs. Smith and Little suggest that employers need to assess attitude when it comes to hiring overseas professionals, as this makes a big difference in how quickly people will adapt.

Little says employers' rigid recruitment practices can prevent this. "Many employers are stuck in a 1980s way of thinking," says Little. "In that decade there were lots of people to choose from and some fairly militant unionism. Employers found that if they didn't select the right person [the union] would be likely to challenge. They needed a bullet-proof system." Little believes employers should build teams — instead of filling holes when they hire — matching weaknesses in skill sets with complementary strengths.

HR professionals would argue that recruitment processes have evolved. The larger firms often spend many thousands of dollars identifying what makes the company tick before writing it into recruitment practice, hoping to recruit candidates with the right attitude. Yet the "right attitude" is nuanced, notoriously difficult to codify and assess from an appraisal of a resume and the more traditional interview.

Also keeping candidates at a distance are recruitment consultants and online resume screening software. Many employers' online careers pages do not have a contact name or number. It can be difficult for applicants to talk directly to someone with close knowledge of the core business who can give them a realistic appraisal of their fit.

Little sees many benefits for organisations willing to open their doors a little wider. While he has observed overseas engineers having a slower path to productivity than their Australian equivalents, he notes the longer term rewards of hiring them as a bonus. "They are less likely to move on than an Australian hire and they have a great work ethic and less baggage from their background," he says. "They bring new skills not available in Australia, and support our international operations with their knowledge and language skills."

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