

Making the Move

In recent years, Australasian law firms have become used to having their young lawyers poached. Australia's and New Zealand's lawyers are well regarded by foreign employers for their strong work ethic, high tolerance for hard work and their solid education and training.

The ranks of two to five-year PQE lawyers are being depleted. While most foreign firms prefer lawyers from top-tier Australian firms because they are more likely to have a specialised area of practice and are likely to be well trained, they are happy to draw them from firms across the country.

Most Australian firms will admit, and recruiters confirm, that the international brain drain is being felt most strongly in the corporate, banking and finance and construction markets.

At the end of the day the market rules. Many lawyers (although not all) want to travel overseas for the opportunities, to be with friends and because it is what generations of Australians have done. Perhaps accepting the inevitable, Australian firms are working hard to better organise staff departures in an effort to encourage lawyers to 'boomerang' back to the firm in due course.

Most firms are prepared to offer extended leaves of absence and even leave without pay, allowing young lawyers their taste of adventure secure in the knowledge that they have a job to come back to after their 12-24 months abroad.

After a few years in London, it is really not too hard to convince most young Aussie lawyers to come home, or even to get UK lawyers to give practising in Australia a go. For UK-based lawyers, the major attraction of working in Australia is the combination of good-quality work and a more balanced lifestyle. Transaction timetables are not as unrealistic in Australia as they can be in the UK and Australia offers a healthier and more sustainable way to work. As for the young Aussies and Kiwis abroad, after a while many simply feel the pull of family and friends. They have had their time away, gained some good practical experience, often on global transactions, and know the opportunities waiting for them in Australia. Australian firms welcome back the best and brightest with open arms and reap the benefits of the experience they bring back with them.

How to get there

Experience is discounted

One thing to note is that your experience may be discounted by overseas firms. The rule of thumb is that your experience will be discounted by 2 years. The reasoning behind this is to bring your experience into line with the UK training system. In the UK, you take a graduate role and then you undertake 2 years of training before you are even considered qualified.

Some time ago when lawyers were more difficult to find, the rules were relaxed slightly.

The majority of British firms that are in the UK, mainland Europe, the Middle East and Hong Kong all follow this system. IN the US, the rules are much the same.

What firm you are coming from

Top-Tier experience is highly desirable, although not the be all and end all. It is rare for an overseas firm to recruit someone from another country and allow them to change practice areas. Therefore it is important to make sure you are currently in an area to make the move OS. We will talk later about desirable practice areas overseas later on.

We are here to help you take the steps you need to get where you want to go. So that may mean moving nationally before internationally.

Sometimes even if you think you might not be back to make the move to a major firm you can also make the move to a larger firm in a smaller location, because then you still have the name on your CV that you need.

There are always options to get you where you want to go. Even if it is not possible to do what you want to do straight away

As international firms have become more knowledgeable about the Australian market, the net for potential candidate has widened.

There is now an interest in specialised boutique practices such as Chang Pistilli.

In the US, banking and finance, “capital markets, and financial market derivatives” are the desirable areas. If you’re considering moving overseas, especially to London or New York, specialising in an area of finance is a big plus, whereas it isn’t so important in certain parts of Asia.

Singaporean law firms like people who have done a bit of everything – they don’t like people who are too specialised. A derivatives lawyer, for example, would be absolutely no use in the Singapore market, but they would be useful in the Tokyo market. That’s where using a recruiter can come in handy because they can advise people as to what markets are best suited to their experience.

Quality of work in the international community is a key reason for moving overseas and one that, if done right, can provide excellent experience that can be transferred back to London. A move back to the UK after a posting is inevitable for the vast majority of legal professionals working abroad. What needs to be evaluated is the relevance of the posting to the UK market. It can prove difficult to make the transition if the work is specific to that country. The long-term benefits to a candidate’s UK career need to be highlighted. Moving to an off-shore tax specialist position may prove lucrative, but understanding its advantages on returning to the UK is crucial. Staying in any role for a long period of time can limit career progression — international posts are no different.

To gain as much experience as possible without slowing career progression, lawyers would normally stay in a role overseas for 24-36 months. This gives enough time to gain vital experience without making the return more challenging due to lack of UK market experience.

An overseas position can add great weight to a lawyer's career, but employers must make employees aware of the challenges as well as benefits. As anyone who has organised a posting abroad knows, the difficulties in bringing an unhappy employee back are numerous. In order to avoid business inefficiency, knowledge of all tax, cultural and financial eventualities are key to securing a happier employee and a smoother business operation.