

## CAREERS

# With Fewer U.S. Opportunities, Home Looks Appealing to Expats

## More Foreign-Born Professionals Are Finding Better Jobs, Lower Unemployment Abroad; 'I've Had Headhunters Calling'

BY DANA MATTIOLI

With unemployment at 10% and prospects for finding work bleak, foreign-born professionals who came to the United States in search of better job opportunities and prosperity are now re-treating.

Foreign-based companies, particularly in Asia, are using the employment picture in the U.S. as a means to lure former residents home. This comes as a welcome respite for professionals who've experienced layoffs, underemployment and visa issues.

Vivek Wadhwa, a senior research associate at Harvard Law School who has studied these trends, says frustrations about the lack of advancement in the U.S., where salary and promotion freezes have become the norm, are a significant factor in foreign-born professionals' heading home.

HSBC Bank International's 2009 Expat Explorer survey found that 23% of U.S.-based expats are considering returning home, compared with 15% elsewhere in the world. The most frequently cited reason was increasingly limited career prospects, according to the survey of more than 3,100 expats, defined as anyone over 18 living outside their country of origin.

### Better Opportunities

Many of these workers perceive better opportunities back home or in other parts of the world.

Regina McAnally, a native of Frankfurt, moved to the U.S. in 1985 but found herself back in Germany in 2007 after the company she worked for as an accountant faced difficulties and her opportunities for advancement became slim.

Ms. McAnally, who never visited her home country during her 22 years in the U.S., now works as a financial analyst with an automotive company in Cologne. She uprooted her son, then 15, to Germany as well.

Ms. McAnally says in the U.S.,

she was unable to find a job despite numerous applications. Not so in Germany. "Since I've been here I've had headhunters calling me at work trying to hire me away," she says, adding that her new employer paid for her overseas move.

Michael Burda, a professor of economics at the Humboldt University of Berlin, says while unemployment is at 7.6% in the country overall, the majority of the unemployed are unskilled.

"I keep telling my friends in the States you need to look for a job here; there's no job shortage if you have a college degree," says Ms. McAnally.

Margaret Morand moved to New York from Australia seven years ago and worked for cosmetics company L'Oreal S.A. in its New York offices. Three years ago she left the company to freelance as a color specialist and handled responsibilities like writing color manuals, working photo shoots and marketing brands. In late 2007, however, work began to slow and by April, securing jobs became much more difficult.

Ms. Morand began applying for full-time positions locally and in Florida and Los Angeles, where she had business connections, but to no avail. In August she returned to Australia. She says she'll miss the energy of New York, the seasons and Central Park. "It's just sad," she says from her parents' home in Melbourne.

Still, with the unemployment rate at 5.7% in Australia, Ms. Morand considers the career opportunities in her home country better. "Certainly compared to New York [the outlook] doesn't appear to be as critical," she says.

### Visa Issues

Beyond the opportunity gap, Mr. Wadhwa says employees with H-1B visas—permits issued to skilled workers from other countries allowing them to work in the U.S.—could be treated unfairly by management. "The employer isn't worried about you leaving them, because it's hard



Regina McAnally returned to Germany—with her 15-year-old son Josh—after 22 years in the U.S. after her opportunities for advancement were limited. She now tells friends to consider making the same move.

to get H-1B jobs. So they give you lower salary increases and inferior work," says Mr. Wadhwa.

Displaced workers with H-1B work visas find themselves with no options other than returning home, says Michael Wildes, managing partner of Wildes & Weinberg PC, a New York-based immigration-law firm. Mr. Wildes says there is no official grace period after a worker with an H-1B visa is laid off, so there's pressure to find a new job immediately, a daunting task in today's hiring climate. The only legal option for these displaced workers is a plane ticket home or a change to visitor status—often limited to a six-month stay—he says.

Many home countries have made significant economic strides in the past decade, making them more appealing to expats living in the U.S.

"When people came here a

decade ago from India and China, they left behind a land where the opportunities aren't nearly what they are today," says Mr. Wadhwa. He expects more than 100,000 expats to return to India in the next five years and says human-resource directors in India and China he has surveyed have noticed a tenfold increase in the number of résumés from the U.S.

And recruiters say in most cases, salaries will be equivalent to or better than what the employees were making in the U.S., although adjusted to the living costs in the new country.

### Interest in Asia

Contact Singapore, an alliance of Singapore's Economic Development Board and Ministry of Manpower that works to attract global talent to work in Singapore, is one group that has noticed more interest in opportunities from Singaporeans

working in America.

Siew Kiang Ng, executive director of the alliance, says New Yorkers in particular are very interested in opportunities back home. "They are finding it difficult to secure a job, and there were many senior talent laid off," she says.

She says that industries such as financial services, research and health care are still thriving on the island nation, where the overall unemployment rate is just 3.4%.

Hui Sin Teo, 25, accepted a position with the Singapore Ministry of Finance in July after graduating from Harvard. Ms. Teo applied for positions in the U.S. and originally planned to work in the U.S. for a while before returning home. But the bad economy accelerated her return.

Anthony Lim Weng Kin, Americas president of the Government of Singapore Investment Corp., a global investment-

management company that participates in Contact Singapore recruiting events, has seen a 20% uptick in applications for its young-professionals program. The program is a yearlong "boot camp" for recruits, after which they are placed within different departments of the firm. He says this year, many applicants are new graduates from New York and the United Kingdom.

"In the past, Singaporean graduates would want to work in the U.S. for a number of years before going back. What's happened in the last 18 to 24 months has accentuated the attractiveness of Asia," he says.

### Recruiting Returnees

What's more, foreign-based companies and U.S. companies with divisions abroad are actively looking to attract displaced talent in the U.S. Eileen Finn, a New York-based executive recruiter, is currently working on a search for a chief financial officer to be based in India. The global financial-services firm that employed her specifically requested an Indian national working in the U.S., the U.K. or other areas with high unemployment.

Ms. Finn says part of what makes these expats attractive to employers is that they have Western experience, they are more willing to return than in times of economic prosperity, they assimilate well into the culture, and they don't necessarily expect the generous expat packages—relocation costs, travel and other perks—that a U.S. citizen would.

Charley Polachi, co-founder of Polachi Access Executive Search in Framingham, Mass., currently is vying for a job to fill several expat spots for a West Coast venture capital firm with operations in India and China.

He says the firm is specifically looking for Indian and Chinese nationals in the U.S. because they have Western skill sets and the cultural, social and language skills necessary to succeed abroad.