

Jobs sans frontières



PETER WILLIAMS WEIGHS UP THE ADVANTAGES OF A FOREIGN ASSIGNMENT AND LOOKS AHEAD TO A TIME WHEN THE DAILY COMMUTE INVOLVES A PLANE TRIP TO EUROPE.

The internationalisation of business means that the number of treasurers who spend their time dealing with cross-border issues is on the rise. For some treasurers, internationalisation may mean actually working outside their home territory while for others it can mean that a large part of their working lives is devoted to foreign affairs.

WORKING ABROAD Quoted companies across Europe now have international operations which require the skills and time of the treasury department. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the old-style expat may be an extinct breed but there is still a requirement among the largest corporates for employees who are willing to work abroad.

The CIPD's view is backed up by the headhunters and recruitment consultants who operate in the treasury and accounting fields. The biggest advantage that companies gain from employees eager for international exposure is that the experience inculcates in them a wider breadth of vision and a preparedness to look at new ways of working and behaving.

A successful spell in the international arena proves that treasurers can operate effectively in different cultures. Working abroad brings valuable experience of different governance, tax and legal regimes, but, perhaps more importantly, exposes treasurers to completely different management styles. Treasurers who have worked abroad comment on the cultural differences. Whereas the UK has largely adopted an American-style informal approach, reflected in open-plan offices and the near-universal use of first names, some countries, perhaps most notably Germany, still hold on to a more formal approach.

If treasurers do fancy a spell abroad they should do some serious research before packing their bags. To secure an overseas post you need seniority and experience. Recruitment consultants say that the greatest demand for the skills and experience that treasurers have to offer comes from territories such as Switzerland, Germany and the Benelux countries.

COMMON LANGUAGE

English has become entrenched as the language of business but anyone spending much time away from an English-speaking country would be well advised to make

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some attempt to pick up the local language – partly because making the effort to learn the language helps enormously in integrating into the society where you are living and working. One treasurer I talked to who had done a stint in Germany said he had easily picked up social German and enough business German to get by.

Securing an assignment abroad with your present employer – perhaps for a fixed time or on a particular project – is seen as a gentle way of testing whether those looking for overseas assignments are really cut out for the move.

Treasurers can offer a particular skill set which a different part of the group may need for a defined period. Clearly, just as some jobs don't work out, so some international assignments will fail to deliver. But treasurers who have had successful spells abroad speak with enthusiasm of the amount they have learnt about the job, the culture and themselves.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUTERS With the advent of modern travel, Europe has shrunk. One treasurer I spoke to reckoned that his current daily commute within the UK involves just as much total travel time as when he used to set off for his European workplace from the UK every Monday – he stayed during the week in the company apartment, which was within walking distance of the office.

A recent report by Future Forum – sponsored by Thomson's Holidays, so you can draw your own conclusions – claims that distance in Europe is no object. It predicts that by 2016 there will be a large number of people who live in one European country but work in another. High UK house prices, cheap flights, flexible working hours, email and the internet will all combine to create a new breed of long-distance commuter. In 10 years' time, it says, there will be 1.5 million people working in the UK but living overseas, using Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted as commuter terminals. The report claims that "the rapid advance of technology and global communications networks will make international commuting highly desirable and viable".

How far that future-gazing turns out to be true only time will tell, but it does reinforce the idea that how you work is becoming as important as where you work.

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