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Working in Africa: Applicants need experience and humility

By Dina Medland

The logistics of securing a job in Africa can vary greatly. Employers advertise locally, but more often senior executive roles are filled by international search firms, boutique headhunters, professional services firms, and private equity firms.

Keli Gadzekpo, founder of Databank, a boutique investment bank in Ghana, says: “If I’m looking for a private equity professional I’m not likely to post the job because there is no central point to do so – inevitably, the search will be outside Ghana. We use PwC, Ernst & Young and Hired Capital, a boutique search firm.”

Mr Gadzekpo has a caution for anyone applying for a job: “Don’t be too sure that you will get it. Africa is still developing but it is competitive and full of bright lights. A bit of humility is needed. You need to be able to learn.”

International headhunters agree on the importance of taking time to understand the colonial history which dictates the language of the country – Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique, French in much of West Africa, Italian in Ethiopia and German in Namibia – and of researching both the potential job and the destination. African-born individuals who have lived and worked abroad and have also worked in their own countries have a distinct advantage for many roles, particularly in regional sales.

On pay, Andrew Brown, chief investment officer of private equity firm EC, says: “Anyone with international level expertise can expect an international level salary.” But he says there remains a “two-tier” market between “international calibre” and the rest, and there are “extreme shortages for certain types of skills, such as international marketing experience”.

For those moving with a family, Derick Boshard, managing partner in Johannesburg at headhunters Heidrick & Struggles, counsels: “Look at schooling and medicare very carefully – medical care can be very dicey north of South Africa. Many companies use a service like international SOS, which says you will be evacuated if you get seriously ill – and this is absolutely essential.”

He adds: “The likelihood is that if you are bringing children they will go to boarding school in South Africa.”

But others disagree – Mr Gadzekpo says he can name “at least five schools in Ghana which are comparable to any private schools in the US” where he has trained and worked. “On the basis of benefits rather than cash pay-out we can offer a quality of life that is better than that in New York or London,” he adds.

In terms of ambition: “The people who do well build relationships, innovate and understand the context in which they are working. They have the ability to blend in,” says Moula Nyoka at search firm Spencer Stuart. She also advises: “If you have a young family you need to make sure that your partner supports you.”

Charles Davis, partner at management consultancy AT Kearney, says: “Do think about what it is like for the wife in the country [of your destination]. After three to six months they often find they have nothing to do except talk to the other wives and get very bored, while life is great for husbands.”