

Testing the Waters - *Preparing for your career in Africa*

“The best advice I can offer to those applying to us is to get real and have some humility”, said the Recruitment Manager of a major African multinational to me recently.

Harsh words, you may think, but the reality is that returning to Africa for your career is not just about going home but about adopting the right strategies to make your return successful. Many African professionals forget, or don't realise, that back home are many equally qualified and considerably more experienced people and that, as new arrivals, they have a great deal to learn before they can fulfil their undoubted potential.

When we launched *Interims for Development* in 2003, it was in the knowledge that there are many Africans in the Diaspora who want to return home to work, but who are less clear about the challenges of successful reintegration. *Interims* projects offer professionals a chance to work within African companies for short periods on a voluntary or reduced fee basis. Such short term assignments also provide an opportunity for those wanting to return to evaluate the implications of a permanent return.

Internship or short contract projects offer a way to build your professional skills and experience of working in Africa. Rather than considering an internship as unpaid labour, consider it as an investment that provides experience and an excellent opportunity to build your networks and test the waters. (See Case Study)

To make the best use of an internship or contract opportunity in Africa:

- Structure well written and focused applications with cv's tailored to the needs of the company you are applying to.
- Do your research on the company you will be working with. What kind of skills are they looking for? How can you make the most of the work experience?
- Research the country. Even if it is home, you have been away for some time and will be out of touch with more recent events.
- Use your network. Family, friends, ex-colleagues, school friends, network groups are an invaluable way to identify contract or internship opportunities.

Internships/short contracts offer a company an opportunity to introduce you to their business, demonstrate the career development opportunities available and gain an insight into how you will perform on the job.

For an African professional contemplating returning, they offer the chance to experience the realities of working in Africa, to learn about the company's culture and policies and to gain experience in the type of job role you may be given. Most importantly, they offer the chance to network and make new contacts.

However, attitude is critical. Focus on what you can contribute and not what you think is due to you. Avoid the temptation to directly compare salaries and instead investigate the

lifestyle that a potential salary package offers you in comparison with your peers at home. Remember that *you* have to adapt to the culture on the ground, not the other way round and listen and think before offering solutions and opinions. If you decide to return, remember the words of the Recruitment Manager, and equate success with humility.

*Double award winner (BFIIN Gold Award for Capacity Building and 2005 GPA Innovative Business Award) **Interims for Development** provides Human Resources Management and technical and managerial training and capacity building services to companies and organisations in Africa. It also provides employment training and returning to Africa workshops, CV review and career coaching programmes for young Africans on an individual and group basis. www.InterimsFD.com*

Case Study

Making Internships Work

For Kofi Atuah, a chartered Chemical Engineer with a certificate in Engineering Management, an internship in Africa was the solution to his desire to undertake a relevant project for his MBA degree while beginning his search for a job in Africa.

Through ***Interims for Development***, Ghanaian-born Kofi, an MBA student at Cranfield School of Management, was introduced to Akuaba Ltd., a furniture manufacturer and retailer in Accra and a project was structured around a business check up, focusing on financial management, market focus and internal management structure. The primary objective of the business check up was to focus on the immediate key issues facing Akuaba, examining the organisation as a whole, and to make recommendations that would be of strategic benefit.

Akuaba is believed to have the highest factory capacity of its competitors and the project report examined business strategies and the implications of the political, social, economic, technological factors affecting the furniture industry using in-company data and background research from industry experts in Ghana as well as interviews with industry professionals and the IFC in Ghana.

Structured internal meetings enabled Kofi to get a better understanding of the manufacturing process and its key production issues. The academic strengths of Kofi's MBA programme were put in practice during his evaluation of the company's financial status. "My meetings in the Finance department helped me to understand the how market focus and improved cash flow management would benefit to Akuaba by making cash available for gaining new business and reducing reliance on the bank. Subsequent interviews with industry experts confirmed that other SME's faced similar demands on their resources."

“The project exceeded my expectations in terms of learning and experience. I was able to put my MBA skills to practical use, and now appreciate some of the issues facing numerous Ghanaian SME’s. I was able to assist the managing director, a dynamic entrepreneur, in areas of financial management, management structure and market focus, and the need to make the transition from ownership to management to enable growth. “

Kofi completes his MBA in August 2004 and the time spent in Ghana has helped to focus his thinking about his future career development. “As someone who would like to live and work in Ghana, this was also an excellent opportunity to also explore both business and career opportunities by networking with other professionals, including industry experts. This network will help to develop future return opportunities at the end of the programme.”