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Expat Job Seekers Need Far More Than Whim

By Luc Jones

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Kommersant recently reported that the number of foreigners applying for jobs in Russia has increased considerably over the past year, and it went to town speculating over the reasons why. In fact, the article was based upon statistics revealed by HeadHunter, a leading website that focuses on employment in Russia and several other former Soviet republics, and it endeavored to explain the trend as a combination of poor economic market conditions in the West and a general improvement in Russia's image abroad.

While I don't doubt the figures a bit, it's worth putting things into perspective. If you were to canvass a broad range of professionals in the eurozone or North America, my guess is the number who have ever even considered working in Russia is minuscule, and an even smaller percentage would actually take a job here if offered.

☒The flat 13 percent income tax is most definitely a key benefit of living and working in Russia, especially compared with the progressive scheme in Western countries.

Nevertheless, some economies in the Persian Gulf offer a zero tax rate, and one of the perks of being posted to countries that have taxes, like Nigeria or Algeria, is that your firm will pay them for you or compensate you in some other way. It's interesting to note that the cost-of-living adjustments or hardship allowances that many expatriates enjoyed in Russia in the 1990s have practically disappeared.

Expats who are transferred to Moscow have most likely thought long and hard about making the move because this place isn't for the fainthearted, especially if you have a young family. The decision requires a careful balance of the enormous opportunity that Russia offers in terms of career development and earning potential with how your wife and children will cope in an alien environment that is freezing cold for half the year and where hardly anyone outside the corporate world speaks English. It's of course a different matter for single guys, who won't want to leave when their time is up.

☒I personally cite an overall lack of serious competition as one of the key benefits for doing business in Russia. This fact, in addition to sky-high world commodity prices, means that the country has money to spend on foreign goods and services. It's not as if much is produced locally. Russia's poor reputation abroad keeps many companies from even dipping their toes in the water, meaning that there is a larger slice of the pie for those willing to take the plunge. My standard response to those frightened of investing in Russia is to stop reading the international media and come out and take a look for themselves. Have a chat with some of the expats you meet in the bar after work, and they'll tell you what business life here is all about.

There are three kinds of white-collar expatriate workers in Russia, which for ease we will refer to as the Corp-pats, the Russ-pats and the Repats.

The minority are the Repats, Russians who left the motherland a decade or two ago and have now returned with a shiny foreign passport. A word of advice: Avoid pitching yourself to Russians as an expat who needs the full expat benefit package. To both Corp-pats and Russ-pats, you're a Repat, but to the Russians you'll always be a Russian.

Corp-pats are almost without exception posted to Russia by their existing company, usually without any prior knowledge of Russia but are seen as a safe pair of hands who know their organizations from the inside and will be able to instill the corporate culture in locally hired staff. Moscow is quite rightly labeled a transient city because the bulk of Corp-pats either return home or move to another country once their time is up.

While Corp-pats can boast impressive CVs, those who do want to stay in Russia are let down by their perceived lack of local knowledge — a three-year stint in an internal financial role with a blue-chip multinational is hardly going to set you up for the harsh reality that is the world of Russian business — and perceived inflexibility to adapt to a life without a famous brand behind them.☒

It's harder to generalize about Russ-pats, who come in all shapes and sizes and sometimes are in fact ex-Corp-pats who have managed to integrate themselves into the real world of Russia outside Class A offices. Some own their own businesses or work for someone who does, while others have found their own niche as a "foreign specialist" in either a Russian company or an international company here. In the worst case, there's always English-

language teaching (as I did back in 1995 and 1996 after graduating from the university). Teaching pays surprisingly well, offers a flexible schedule and is always in demand.

While there are excellent Russ-pats out there, the bulk of foreign firms almost always overlook them, saying: "We want a Russian. If we needed an expat, we'd bring in one of our own people," making the top-end multinational world a tough place to break into.

With every passing year, more and more qualified Russians are entering the labor pool, and today's graduates know little or nothing about the Soviet past. Even though the market has grown more quickly than local candidates have developed for much of the past decade, the old adage remains that as a foreigner you need to be able to do something that Russians can't do, or if they can, be able to do it better, or differently. Being an expat in itself is not a profession. You are competing for the same vacancies as everyone else.

The pointers I would offer to any budding expatriate job hunters are first work out where you could be of most use here and why someone would want to employ you as opposed to an experienced Russian. Language skills are an obvious starter.I'm still surprised at how many people have been in Russia for a decade and can barely string a sentence together in Russian.

But relevant work experience tends to be the key. Additionally, you do need to physically be in Russia to have any chance of landing a job because even though this is the largest country in the world, business — and in particular interviewing — is done face to face here. Saying "I can fly in if required" simply won't wash. And if you're reading this as someone who just fancies coming to Russia to try his chances in a growing market or to move in with a Russian girl, my advice would be to forget it. Unless, that is, you're happy teaching English.

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