

a career in Shanghai

the challenges faced by young expatriates

by Oliver Draper

A small number of young expatriates may be lucky enough to have been sent to Shanghai as part of a graduate training program. But most other foreign graduates chose to make their own way to Shanghai, drawn by the lure of the Orient, and then look for work on arrival.

While for many China may be a land of opportunity, the reality is that many of these young guns quickly become disillusioned when they experience first-hand the challenges of finding a job. Their lack of employment experience, overseas exposure and the inability to speak Mandarin do not stand them in good stead, especially when compared with returning overseas educated, bilingual, Chinese graduates. Many have to make rapid adjustments to their expectations and often end up following an unexpected career path.

Below we offer some advice to newly arrived foreign graduates in the process of getting their careers established.

have realistic expectations

China is a more popular employment destination than ever before and the newspapers are full of tales of labor and skills shortages. The unfortunate reality is that as a newly graduated expatriate you may find that you fall between the gaps in ever expanding workforce as China's real needs are in the areas of factory workers who earn less than USD 100 per month and bilingual managers with seven to ten years of proven experience. A newly printed Bachelor of Arts degree from a British University, while three years in the making, may not open as many doors as you had hoped.

In an environment where almost every Foreign Invested Enterprise is looking to localize their China management team and thus reduce their payroll costs, expatriates typically are engaged for one of two reasons. The first is to "transfer knowledge" to the local team, whether it be technical knowledge or knowledge of a process or system. These kind

of roles are generally short-lived as the successful incumbent of such a position will have taught his subordinates the ropes within two to three years. The second role is that of the manager whose principal responsibility is to ensure that the instructions of the overseas head office are carried out and that quality standards and financial targets are met. Both of these roles require considerable experience within the workplace, and as such are opportunities that will not be available to your average graduate.

That aside, opportunities for young expatriates do exist, although they are few and far between. Some companies have junior roles that require good English language communication skills and a basic understanding of Western management practices and while these roles may not be exactly what you had in mind, they often offer the opportunity of getting a foot in the door.

Remember, "finding a job is a job in itself" and unless you are blessed with good fortune, good opportunities do not fall at your feet, they need to be hunted down in a competitive and arduous chase and you need to prepare yourself for this challenge.

be flexible

There are many ways for a young expatriate to make a living in China, from being one of the lucky ones who finds a corporate role, to teaching English, modeling for the garment industry or using your creative skills and writing for one of the English language magazines. You may however have your heart set on a particular career, and while you should certainly not discontinue the job hunt too soon you should try and remain open-minded about the real opportunities available to you.

learn Mandarin

One of the best advantages that you can give yourself is to learn the language. Being able to communicate in fluent Mandarin with staff, customers or vendors will often be enough for an employer to make concessions in respect to a lack of proven work skills or experiences. It is a simple fact that a second language is a door opener. Mandarin is a difficult language to learn, a learning process that requires perseverance and dedication. If you are a young expatriate who has mastered the language the doors of employment opportunity will open.

do your research

There are many ways to approach a job hunt. A starting point is to recognize that only about 30% of all jobs available are advertised. The remaining 70% are filled more discretely by way of choosing from direct applicants, networking, or accepting referrals.

With this in mind you need to ensure that your job search strategy covers all possible channels. Make sure you look at the popular internet job boards – www.zhaopin.com and www.51job.com in particular – however many of the Business Chambers and Associations also have vacancies advertised on their websites. In addition, the Business Chambers and Associations are often approached by potential employers and many of them also maintain a database of job seekers, so there would be no harm in making contact and lodging your résumé with them.

Not many of the corporate recruiters with offices in China are involved in graduate recruitment however, so you should make sure that you are registered on the databases of the ones that are.

By far the most proactive approach is to apply directly to employers. Almost all companies will maintain a database of applicants for roles within their organizations, so preparing a strong cover letter to accompany your résumé, researching the appropriate contact person and sending a personalized application will serve to draw an employer's attention to your availability.

preparation

The adage “Prior Preparation Prevents Poor Performance” cannot be overused by career advisors because, put quite simply, the more time and focus spent on preparing and implementing your job search strategy, the better your chances of finding employment.

There are three main areas to focus on:

Résumés – A good résumé should be limited to either one or two pages. Chronological résumés (those where your employment experiences and educational achievements are listed in chronological order) can often “overexpose” the fact that you have limited work experience. Functional résumés (a non-linear format that focuses on skills, functions and capabilities) can often help the employer see how your skills relate to the position you are applying for while not highlighting your inexperience.

Remember, a résumé, no matter how good, will not get you a job by itself. However, a good résumé will attract attention and help you to secure a job interview. You will then have to work hard to secure a position during a face-to-face interview.

Cover Letters – A good cover letter may get you an interview; a bad one may make your résumé little more than an afterthought. With this in mind it's important to recognize that the cover letter is a chance to sell yourself as the best candidate for the job. The key secrets to a good cover letter are: make sure you introduce yourself and the reason for writing; sell yourself; personalize the letter; make a plan of what you wish to happen next; type the letter (handwritten cover letters are a thing of the past); be natural; be positive; be available; proof-read; sign it!

Target, Target, Target – Target your job search by narrowing down the field to a specific list of companies you want to work for. Target the specific person making the employment decision and ensure that your résumé gets to them. Target your résumé by emphasizing what you can do for an employer and tailoring your résumé to the specific position you're applying for.

be contactable

Thankfully in China, obtaining a mobile phone SIM card is relatively inexpensive so make sure that you are always available on at least one telephone number. Email addresses are important and you need to ensure that you are checking your account on at least a daily basis if you are expecting responses from employers.

interviews

It's important to make a good impression by doing your homework beforehand. The more you know about the company and the job you are applying for the better you will perform in an interview. Practise your answers to common questions; also prepare a list of questions you may want to ask the employer. Rehearse with a friend; check your diction and speed. Take a copy of your résumé and any references to the interview; you never know when they may be needed. Dress comfortably and appropriately, a standard guide is to wear what you would be wearing if you had been given the job. When in doubt, dress conservatively. Take a pen and note pad to jot down any information that you need to remember (but do not take notes during the interview). Being on time (or early) is interpreted as evidence of your organization, commitment and dependability. Being late can remove all opportunity of being employed before the interview has even started. Be positive and relax. Think of the interview as a conversation and not an interrogation, and remember, often the interviewer is just as nervous about making a good impression on you!

It's important to keep in mind that the odds are stacked against you. As China produces more English-speaking university graduates and an increasing number of overseas educated Chinese return home, the job hunting challenges that face young, newly qualified expatriates are huge. Do not expect any easy ride or for the perfect opportunity to appear during the first week of your search. You must persevere with the process of uncovering opportunities and keep your mind open to alternative career paths.

In addition, with fresh Chinese graduate salary levels falling, and with such candidates expecting a salary of approximately RMB 2,000-3,000 per month, it is unrealistic to demand the same level of pay that you might expect for a graduate position back home. When calculating your salary expectations, first establish your cost of living in Shanghai including your rent and other living expenses and work from there. To compete with the local talent, you must be able to compete on price. Consider lowering your expectations, to facilitate the employer's decision to hire you. Then once employed, prove your value to the organization and then renegotiate the terms and conditions once you have established your value.

To quote a Chinese proverb: "A gem is not polished without rubbing, nor a man perfected without trials" so polish your résumé and do as much research and preparation as you can to prepare yourself for the trial ahead. ■