



Your country
needs
you

Ciaran Sheehan, Managing Partner of executive search and selection professionals Clarendon Executive, explains why we need our ex-pats to come home

“More ex-pats than ever are seriously considering returning home to be part of a dynamic economic scene and they aren’t the only ones benefiting from Northern Ireland’s changing fortunes. Multinational companies are arriving, from as far afield as India and America.”

The New Zealand government’s campaign to counteract its country’s ‘brain drain’ and entice people back from the UK to plug a skills gap certainly created an emotional stir when it was launched in 2005.

I am sure that many New Zealand ex-pats in London waiting for the tube to work on a typically miserable British day saw the posters of idyllic beaches and landscapes and felt an overwhelming surge of homesickness.

However in my view the campaign slightly missed the mark. Everyone - at least those who have lived in New Zealand and who are the targets of the campaign - know how beautiful their island is; they know there are miles upon miles of white sandy beach to be enjoyed; in short they know it offers a fantastic lifestyle.

The reality is that for many ‘high fliers’ it’s not the lure of bright lights and big city keeping them in Britain. Rather it is the lack of jobs in New Zealand, or perceived lack thereof. Ultimately the campaign failed to convince many Kiwis that there were decent jobs back home.

But New Zealand is not alone in its quest to woo people back. Northern Ireland faces a similar challenge.

The people of Northern Ireland have always professed to have a great work/life balance but perhaps it could more accurately be described as having a great life.

We are renowned for our stunning scenery and legendary craic, but certainly Northern Ireland has never been, nor claimed to be, the hub of the corporate elite. The variety of and calibre of work just could not

compete with other cities and so people left in pursuit of it. In the end the lifestyle was not enough.

Fortunately however times seem to be changing. The days when employees left the office at 5pm sharp are becoming a distant memory. In a climate of greater economic, political and social stability more opportunities are coming our way, and a pledged £50 billion in investment along with significant infrastructural investment over the next decade mean things can only get better. And people are realising it.

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At the moment we don’t have enough senior talent to satisfy the appetite. We need even more people to come home and fill these posts. We need these people to help improve our productivity and make our economy even stronger.

Responsibility for our economic future cannot of course be landed at the feet of our ex-pats. We need to look closer to home. It is down to Northern Ireland plc, its agencies and hopefully our devolved government to put Northern Ireland on the global map. We need to make this a place people want to return to and stay!

There’s much to be said for people leaving these shores to experience different cultures and then bringing that experience back to the benefit of Northern Ireland. It’s just that the last part has proved a bit tricky.

In the past the excuse was high unemployment levels, threat of terrorism and so on. Now people are more likely to cite other reasons such as relatively low wages and pace of economic regeneration. We must address these issues as a matter of priority.

That hotly debated subject of corporation tax is going to be crucial. A recent report claims that if corporation tax was slashed from 30 per cent to 12.5 per cent, the economy’s growth could double, productivity would catch up with the average UK levels, incomes could increase and in turn we would attract more people living abroad home. To attach some significance, the study indicated that incoming FDI would lead to 180,000 additional jobs by 2030 and would add over £30 billion to regional incomes. Our economy would undoubtedly flourish.

Of course we have a long way to go but it is heartening to see that Belfast is now at least at the table when it comes to competing with other UK cities.

What we need now is a combined approach. On the one hand we need the business community to think more globally and create the environment in which people want to come home. On the other, we need ex-pats who want to bring their expertise back and make a real difference.

Only then will we be able to offer people the best of both worlds – a true balance of a good life and a challenging career. Tugging at the emotional heartstrings will not suffice.