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# Expatriate job-seekers taking their chances in Singapore

More are coming empty-handed to try their luck in 'gateway' to Asia

By Joanna Seow

BARELY a year ago, Ms Lisa Reta arrived in Singapore with only a suitcase in tow. She did not have a job, but she knew she wanted to be here, both to explore the region and to boost her career.

"Being in a regional hub, you get greater exposure than you would in Australia or New Zealand," the 29-year-old Kiwi said. "There are more opportunities here to get involved in large-scale projects."

So she spent two months on a social visit pass speaking to recruiters and waiting for a contract, while moving from friends' rooms to a rental flat shared with other people.

She finally landed a year-long contract job in marketing at a multinational financial firm, and has just had that contract renewed.

Increasingly, expats like Ms Reta are no longer coming to Singapore on lavish packages.

A growing number are willing to come empty-handed and take their chances in this "gateway" to Asia.

"The number of company-assigned expats has fallen drastically in Asia and in Singapore over the last decade," said Singapore-based global mobility researcher Yvonne McNulty.

Many also choose to stay on and look for other jobs after their initial contracts expire, she shared.

Foreign professionals can apply for jobs while visiting Singapore. But their visit passes may not be extended by the authorities if the job prospects are unclear, according to the Manpower Ministry's website.

Mr Satish Bakhda, chief operating officer at recruitment consultancy Rikvin, said that he has been seeing more such young people coming from countries such as Britain, India and the Philippines.

"Unemployment in Britain is slightly higher, and salaries here are comparable," he explained.

Mr Andrea Costantini, secretary-general of the Italian Club, estimates that some five university graduates come to Singapore from Italy every month to look for jobs.

Expats choose Singapore mainly because of its access to the Asian market and the country's English working language, among several reasons.

The ease of communication was a major selling point for one 37-year-old British IT consultant, who wanted to be known only as Yin. It makes it easier to apply for jobs, he shared.

He came to Singapore close to three years ago, after the British economy had taken a downturn. He was on the Employment Pass Eligibility Certificate, a scheme that allowed him to remain in Singapore for up to one year while searching for a job. The scheme was discontinued in 2011.

Another expat who came to try his luck was New Zealander Joseph Barratt, 29, who came three years ago on a six-month Work Holiday Programme visa.

He spent six months doing freelance public relations work while looking for a longer-term job. He and his

girlfriend stayed with friends for months.

"I would finish a project and think, 'Okay, now I've enough money for two to three weeks'," he said.

He ended up starting his own public relations firm and has since expanded it to a five-man show.

This trend is expected to continue for at least the next few years, said DBS economist Irvin Seah, who cited the lacklustre economy in many European countries.

But more job-seekers may have to return home empty-handed.

Bank of America Merrill Lynch economist Chua Hak Bin said that the number of employment passes given out last year was "basically flat" although job growth was strong.

"Finding jobs now could be harder because of stricter manpower policies," he said.

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