

SA offers soft landing for skills back from African diaspora

One of South Africa's early pioneers on the continent, MultiChoice, found a major challenge to be a shortage of skills in markets where few had experience of working for large corporations. And as quickly as they built up skills, other multinationals entering these markets snapped them up.

By [Dianna Games](#) 20 Nov 2012

In the book *Business in Africa: Corporate Insights*, company executives talk about these early challenges. Being a first-to-market mover in many countries meant MultiChoice not only pioneered business development but also the development of talent.

Nearly 20 years on, the company's management is almost entirely local. The benefit is that these managers understand what is happening on the ground, enabling the company to respond to problems much faster.

For multinational companies with operations in emerging markets, getting top talent from developed countries to locate to Africa, for example, can be difficult. Outside SA, most countries are regarded as hardship postings. Having a strong core of expatriates was necessary in the past because education was geared to skills development, there was not a critical mass of large corporations in which well-educated people could hone their skills and many of the most ambitious and educated people sought employment elsewhere.

Although the availability of skills and top talent is still well below the demand, things are changing. As more opportunities open up, it is getting easier to lure skills back from the diaspora. And as the corporate pie grows, so more local skills are being developed and nurtured. Money is also being ploughed into incentives to keep the head hunters away.

A new trend is emerging. Companies, including African firms, are building teams of management professionals and moving them around different country operations. Thus you will find a Nigerian managing a South African company in Ghana or Kenya.

Being an African from another country does not obviate the need for expatriate quotas for such executives but, as Africans, they are nevertheless usually more conversant with the peculiarities and diverse challenges of operating in Africa than their overseas counterparts might be. For this group of people, being relocated to another emerging market is a challenge to be embraced rather than a hardship.

SA is well positioned to capture "regional talent" from the diaspora as many returning skilled Africans have found the country to be a soft landing as they look for opportunities.

The movement of African talent around the continent also offers advancement for executives that is not restricted to a person's country of origin and thus makes it easier to attract top African talent and retain it.

As more emerging market companies spread out across Africa, the hunt for talent is growing, putting further pressure on existing assets.

Another book that was launched recently, *Talent Management in Emerging Markets*, looks at the way multinationals have had to change their human resources practices and policies as they have moved from

being local companies to global players.

Case studies of SABMiller, Standard Bank and others highlight the importance in these multinationals' global expansion. Starting with small teams of dedicated managers who took the company culture across borders, these companies are now dealing with a complex web of employees and shareholders across many cultures.

While great store is still placed on good instincts, more independent measures of talent spotting are required. Psychometric testing has become the norm for determining who works best where, for example.

It is a difficult balancing act to be both global and local, but getting that balance right is what is increasingly differentiating some multinationals from their competitors.

Source: Business Day

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