When Zhuang* first returned to Singapore after working as a retail professional in Australia for almost a decade, she was dismayed at the lack of work-life balance at home. “We work extremely long hours. I can hardly do activities outside work just to keep up. And the pay is definitely smaller. The contrast was so great, I was trembling at the end of my first week back here,” she shared.

Zhuang is not alone in her disappointment. A report by Hays revealed that a staggering 40% of Singaporean returnees are dissatisfied with their roles, mainly due to a mismatch of skills to jobs or roles available. Almost half of returnees also cited unsuitable remuneration and unfamiliarity with local job market conditions as hurdles to their job search.

“Depending on where the candidate is returning from the US, UK or even Hong Kong, in most cases the candidate will need to accept a marginally lower overall package,” noted Andie Rees, managing partner, Southeast Asia at Odgers Berndtson. “If they have come from Western countries, they may not get as many headquarters opportunities as they had previously. This applies to both MNCs (very few have global functions here) and with local companies (which do not have the level of corporate sophistication in their HQs like MNCs do),” he adds.

“Whilst skilled Singaporean professionals are most open to working abroad compared to their counterparts across Asia, many are realising that greener pastures do not necessarily exist overseas,” said Grant Torrens, regional director of Hays in Singapore. “This is particularly apparent in popular destinations for Singaporean migration such as Australia, UK, and the US where work visas and immigration rules are tightening, whilst the economy of superpowers are declining.”

Mismatched expectations
Almost a third of Singaporean returnees expect an increased salary upon returning home, whilst 45% are willing to receive the same remuneration as when they were overseas. However, about two-thirds of employers are unable to secure returning Singaporean talents due to a mismatch in expectations of offer packages.

“When compared to the rest of Asia, Singaporean overseas returnees have more realistic salary expectations. In the course of our report, we asked overseas returnees, ‘What were your salary expectations for your first job back in the country/region of your birth?’ The majority said they expected to ‘earn a salary equivalent to what they were earning overseas’, while 32% expected an increased salary from what they were earning overseas,” said Torrens.

This is why to attract returning workers, some companies are now offering enhanced salary packages for Singaporean returnees. “There is an increasing trend of ‘enhanced local’ package whereby the returning employee gets a higher salary than a ‘pure local’ (someone who has not worked overseas) but not the full expatriate salary that they had previously been given,” Rees highlighted.

However, returning workers shouldn’t expect a generous salary bump. Data from Hays show that whilst over half of employers are willing to offer returnees a salary package higher than that of their peers, only 22% would give 11% to 25% more. Almost a third are keen on providing up to 10% more.

“Higher salary or benefits are not related to just having worked overseas, where the years itself would not solely count for everything. Companies are willing to pay extra for additional experiences and skills learned relevant to them, i.e. you come back with better communication skills, stronger understanding of working in a foreign environment, additional skills learned in a different marketing/sales/HR/operational setting, etc. There are also companies which offer no extra perks for returning Singaporeans,” Rees cautioned.

Filial duty calls
Over half of overseas Singaporean workers choose to return in order to be closer to family. “Our report found a variety of reasons why Singaporeans move back home, but the top reason voted by nearly half of our respondents (45%), was to be closer to their families. This was followed by factors such as ‘the opportunity to progress and develop [their] careers’ (29%) and ‘the
culture and lifestyle in their home country or region.’ The least cited reason was to ‘start their own businesses’, cited only 3% of respondents,” Torrens said.

“Family is the most common reason that drive workers back to Singapore. This includes immediate family adaptability to the country of employability, ageing parents back home or children entering primary school,” Rees explained. “Accelerating one’s career back in Singapore is another reason for returning home after gaining international working experience.”

Rees added that there are cases where the families themselves do not adapt well to living overseas. “It is not uncommon to see families relocate back here with the father working overseas. Some fathers return after one to two years back to their families. A personal friend has returned after working in Hong Kong for three years as the mother felt Singapore is a more conducive place to raise a family,” he shared.

Lee*, a marketing professional who has lived for over 12 years in Australia, agreed. “I returned precisely because of my ageing parents and the greater availability of work in my profession,” he said. “White collar jobs in my area were also very difficult to break into in Australia. We were heavily affected by outsourcing, and it has been very tough to find long-term and full-time permanent work in Melbourne.”

“Most Singaporeans would find it generally easy to settle back here as the work environment is similar and they can easily plug back into their network of family and friends,” Rees said. “However, for Singaporean families with young children, the biggest issue in adapting back home is education, as MOE does not allow Singaporean children to enrol in international schools; parents would have to apply for exemptions from MOE. These children would typically have had overseas schooling which is vastly different from the local schooling system and so would find it difficult to adapt. Over the last five years, we have seen plenty of cases where the children do not do so well in local school and there is some parental guilt in not being able to manage that change,” he noted.

Challenges upon returning
Coming home can prove to be challenging for some overseas Singaporeans. For instance, returnees have to watch out for different communication styles between overseas and domestic firms. “The way you communicate in a Singaporean company (or context) is different than in Australia, US, Germany, Japan, etc. Singaporeans could potentially struggle adjusting after having lived or worked in a different environment for an extended period of time. They would likely end up working for foreign multinationals as it is easier to adapt to a similar working environment,” Rees noted.

The more demanding work environment is also a key challenge. Since returning to Singapore, Lee has been able to find permanent employment but laments the lack of work-life balance. “Working in Australia was less stressful and the pay was also decent. I hardly feel any satisfaction working the long hours here, and sometimes I regret moving back,” he shared.

However, Torrens highlighted that the lack of local work experience can also harm job candidates. “As mentioned, there is a mismatch in expectations of offer packages. About two thirds of employers (65%) are unable to secure returning Singaporean talents for this reason. Another concern 36% of employers have is that returnee candidates ‘lack the local work experience’, since companies are usually looking for knowledge of cultural nuances and corporate processes to navigate the local business landscape,” he noted.

Returnees also still have to compete against the global candidate marketplace. “In a recent search for a client, although we had four local candidates and one foreign candidate, including a local candidate who has been based in the US for 10 years. The foreign candidate was chosen as he had the most international profile; while the US-based Singaporean was a finalist, that person was not selected as there was a profile that had been at a more senior level in international organisations,” Rees said.

An international edge
Still, it’s not all doom and gloom for professionals seeking to return home. Over eight out of 10 companies are willing to hire workers with international experience, and companies are keen to hire returnees due to tighter hiring quotas for foreigners. “Returnees do provide the international experience while being Singaporean. It is a win-win situation to have a ‘local’ leader with a broader international exposure,” Rees noted.

He added that international experience sets candidates apart from those who have never left the country, especially in a market where local leaders do not have strong overseas work experience. “Many MNCs with operations in Singapore that we have spoken with would not hand over the top-level leadership to a local Singaporean candidate if they have not had some element of international exposure,” he said. “Singapore is one of the most diverse economies and the MNCs are a reflection of that. Unwillingness to relocate internationally for a long-term assignment could limit an otherwise high-potential Singapore talent.”

“‘There is definitely an advantage for returnees. Most Singaporean employers (79%) believe ‘cross-cultural awareness’ is the top benefit returnee talent can bring to the table, followed closely by 71% who said ‘different perspectives on business’ and 62% who said ‘overseas commercial experience’ were key advantages of having overseas returnees in their workforce,” Torrens added.

Local businesses are also extremely open about hiring overseas returnees, with 82% saying that they are willing to do so in the next 12 months. Seventy five percent of firms are willing to hire mid-level professionals. Many employers report to have had good experiences with their overseas returnee staff and would, in fact, play advocate for the hiring of skilled candidates who have worked or studied abroad, Torrens said.

“Returnees could stand to benefit from showcasing how their skills learned overseas can help improve existing business processes and translate into business value for employers,” he added.