

Should I stay or should I go?

FIVE GRADUATES SPEAK ABOUT STAYING IN OR LEAVING THE SA WORKFORCE.

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(S) South Africa is suffering from a massive skills haemorrhage, losing thousands of newly graduated professionals to seemingly 'greener pastures' each year. Many blue-chip companies are battling to find and attract suitable graduates to enlist in their bursary, scholarship and/or internship programmes. Then, once they have found, trained and integrated their new graduates – at a significant cost – the graduates leave.

So what exactly is making South Africa's talented graduates so keen to bat for overseas teams? Are their motivations primarily financial, political or social? What kind of companies are graduates looking for? What kind of opportunities are proving the most attractive? In short, what does it take to make our skilled graduates stay in SA?

The reasons for staying or leaving differ from graduate to graduate.

Young professionals today are more switched on, more mobile and a lot more self-confident than their parents were when it comes to a real feel for the kind of value they add to the companies they work for. While salaries remain important, they also attach significant value to their career paths – with many preferring to join companies that have thought this through and can show their new employees a clear progression route.

Commitment to corporate social investment is also a strong driver and I've had graduates tell me that they won't consider joining a firm that doesn't give something back to the community. The opportunity to participate in a formal mentoring programme is also something that more and more graduates are starting to focus on.

Here's what five graduates currently employed in South Africa had to say.

RYAN PAULSEN (22)

Ryan has a BCom Finance Degree, is planning to complete his CIMA qualification in 2009 and is a sales operations analyst for IBM SA.

"When I graduated, I wanted to start my career in an organisation that is highly regarded in all industries, with a strong focus and vision for the future. IBM SA fulfilled all these desires and I am currently contracted as a graduate trainee. The only reason I would look overseas is for further training and skills development, but I believe the scope for high level growth and the global scale of IBM SA, plus all the benefits I will enjoy once I become part of the permanent staff, will be competitive enough to keep me in South Africa. Generally

– and especially in our current global situation – I would say that ongoing upskilling, competitive salaries and benefits like petrol allowances, a strong mentorship/ training programme and the possibility of overseas travel for work enrichment is what will retain our graduates. I think that until South Africans switch to a more positive, patriotic mindset and improve our socio-economic issues – politics, poverty and crime – it's going to be a struggle to keep our grads. As for myself, I believe that South Africa and other emerging markets will be undergoing major growth in years to come, providing excellent opportunities – so this is definitely the place to be!"

GLADYS-MAGDELINE NTABANYANE (25)

Gladys holds a BA with Psychology and Education majors, a BSoc Science Honors in Psychology and is currently on a short contract as an intern/research assistant with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), with plans in place to do her Masters in Research Psychology in 2009.

"I think for local companies to retain their graduates, they need to place them in positions highly relevant to their training, have a comprehensive upskilling and mentoring programme and offer globally competitive packages and benefits. We also need to achieve a more stable political climate and deal with our levels of crime in order for grads to feel secure about their future here. After graduation, I sought a position where I could gain as much exposure as possible in my field. I want to arm myself with solid skills in terms of learning to conduct a

research project , such as the writing up of questionnaires/data instruments, data-coding, data-capturing, data-analysis and report-writing. Luckily, the HSRC fulfilled these needs, as well as most of the pretty stringent 'non-negotiables' I was looking for in a company. It is a respectable and well-established institution with clearly laid out goals and values with an ethical stance, that promotes growth and development and contributes not only to the financial sector, but to the country as a whole. There is a great organisational culture in the company which promotes diversity and equality, respects and values its human capital in terms of recognising potential and encouraging leadership; and there is also a supportive management structure in place and a strong focus on corporate social investment. And the importance of flexible working opportunities and hours are a surprisingly big bonus! In terms of skills development, in my short time at the HSRC I've refined my writing skills to the point where my boss and I have co-authored an article which is to be published in an international journal next year. I would only consider leaving South Africa if I were offered a position where I could do my PhD and work at the same time, and was offered a substantially improved package and prospects for career development. I personally feel that the country does not value graduates from the social sciences. It is very hard for people in the social sciences to get decent jobs here and I am still battling to get a scholarship for my post-grad degree. In 2011, when I look for my first permanent position, I hope the situation has improved and I can be offered employment in line with the skills I would have gained by then – otherwise I would consider leaving, but my reasons for doing so would be purely related to career/self-development.'

KWAME ADU-ASOMANING (26)
Kwame holds a BSc Eng (Electrical Engineering) degree from UCT and has been a junior electrical engineer at a prominent engineering firm for a year, with plans to do his Masters in Engineering Management and

then his MBA within the next six years.

"I chose my company for its sound consulting and engineering record, global outlook and diverse involvements in projects in the mining, metals, energy and infrastructure industries. It also offers lots of opportunities for growth and personal development. At the moment, I'm very pleased with my working environment and the work experience gained so far in my first year of work. I would only consider leaving for an overseas firm for a global exposure, substantially better career opportunities and remuneration packages, but the primary reason I would consider leaving is because of South Africa's future political uncertainty. I think if you give graduates room and support for growth and development, good packages in terms of remuneration and benefits and offered them a more secure environment in terms of a sound political environment and less crime, then you would be able to keep them in South Africa."

KGOMOTSO POOE (28)
Kgomotso holds a Diploma in Copywriting and has been a senior account Manager at a top branding company for nine months.

"I love my industry and am passionate about branding, and my current position allows for the exercising and polishing of these skills. So I would consider moving overseas only for a top brand management offer that would position me as a brand master in the international industry. My move would therefore be strictly a business move in order to further hone my skills and I would stay for as long as my learning lasted, but would then love to return home and grow the local branding market. So, even if I did leave for a while, I would be back and I would take care not to lose touch with the 'man in the SA street'. Generally though, I think that aside from graduates leaving for better pay and perks, which of course is always a factor, a lot of them leave as their skills aren't being recognised, acknowledged and capitalised on in

terms of constant development, and also because of inter-office politics. In fact, I always say that a person doesn't leave the company they work for, they leave the manager they work under!"

RUMBIDZAI MAKINA (24)
Rumbidzai holds a BA Hons (Industrial Relations), has been with IBM SA as a strategy and change consultant for almost two years and plans to do her Masters and obtain an MBA within the next 10 years.

"I am attracted to high-pressure, fast-paced environments that allow for individuality and growth and I've found this and more at IBM. The 'perks' most important to me are that I have the ability to work across sectors, thereby gaining experience in a variety of industries. There are a plethora of career paths within IBM so it's great to know that if at any time I decide to change career direction or my location I can do that within the same company. I also love the flexible working arrangements, in that I am not tied to a desk all the time and there is the option to work from clients' sites as well as remotely. Career-wise, the reason I am staying here is primarily financial – compared to friends of mine overseas, I find that the quality of life I lead is much better and there are more opportunities to build a professional career. So I would only consider leaving if I had an offer with significantly increased responsibility, more aligned to where I see myself in the next 10 years. Currently the local market holds a lot more attraction for me. I think we are in a very significant period right now where the African continent has a lot more opportunity for growth than the American or European markets, so I would much rather stay here. Companies need to be aware of the fact that Generation X's and Y's are very different from the types of people that have been coming into companies previously. We like to be entertained and challenged. That means less monotonous work and more cutting-edge, fast-paced projects. We do not like to be confined to what were traditionally 9 to 5 jobs, and we like to progress up the career ladder quite fast." (HRf)

