

Coping with constant change

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Just eighteen months ago, I wrote in this column about the stress of expatriate life in the UAE -with warnings not to get carried away by a new-found affluence.

It makes strange reading today, now that the tide has turned as a consequence of changing markets.

But a retreating tide can reveal much, and as a professional trainer and counsellor, I've certainly heard enough opinions to be able to sense the changes in the image and self-image of expatriates in the UAE.

Hopefully, we have now seen the back of the 'gold rush' gang - the, mainly, European job-seekers who claim naturally high status, and salaries, but want no stake in the future of the country. I am not sorry to see the end of those days and the newly competitive environment is now healthy, leaner and fitter, as a result.

Many nationals have hailed this as a revolution, with less competition from expatriate job-seekers but wiser heads warn about the downside, foreseeing a possible new class of appointees in the boardroom.

They point out the well-proven value of European and other expatriate expertise and mentoring skills, as well as the direct benefits of a multi-cultural workforce.

Such changes are reflected in two very different cases from my recent counselling agenda.

One was an English expat who had been in Dubai since the early pioneer days of the 70's. He came from a family firm that built seaside playgrounds in popular British resorts like Bournemouth and Brighton.

This gave him credibility with the UAE tourist authorities, who granted him contracts in the new resort areas of Dubai. But inevitably, he faced competition in a field that was not truly specialist, and he showed little interest in the new hi-tech playground equipment that was taking over. He had become 'yesterday's man', yearning for the good old days, and I told him he should take retirement as soon as he could afford it.

Another was a young Dutch acoustics engineer, who had his eye on the likely growth in broadcast stations. But not only was there more home-grown competition than he expected; there was also an increasing requirement for fluency in English and Arabic, both for business and technical dialogue.

With great determination, he overcame both obstacles - working hard on the languages (for which he had no natural talent) and increasing his qualifications in acoustic engineering. All this when he had originally imagined he would be able to live opulently in the traditional expatriate style.

It set up a good deal of stress, as I know, because that's why he called me in. But by facing up to the need for change, he was optimising his future position, and his steady efforts gained the respect of his colleagues. He is now chief engineer at one of the largest radio stations in the Gulf.

Key points: The race is closer

- European background alone does not guarantee status in the UAE
- The newly competitive environment raises standards at work
- Expatriates who can adapt will still play a key role in national life

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.