

SPECIAL AGENT

Finding the right migration agent can take a huge amount of pressure off you, allowing you to focus on your move, writes Karen Bleakley



Moving to Australia is a project with lots of moving parts. There's shipping, job hunting, selling or renting your home, saying goodbye to family... But the most crucial part of it all is your visa. Without that, you aren't going anywhere.

WHY USE AN AGENT?

A good migration agent can help you identify the best visa for your needs. Some visas have budget implications when you arrive in Australia (such as whether you're eligible for free state schooling in certain states, or whether you can apply for benefits like rent assistance). An agent will advise on the pros and cons of each and help you pick the best route.

An agent will be able to look at your skills, qualifications and experience and work out which occupation suits you. It may sound easy to look at a list and find your occupation, but it's not always that simple. I've heard many stories about people submitting their skills assessment for an occupation only to be rejected because their UK job title didn't match the assessment criteria for that job in Australia.

Reapplying costs time and money, and an agent can help you get through the assessment first time. They can also guide you through the process, so instead of trying to decipher what you need to put in

your applications at the various stages, they'll ask you for the information in plain English without any jargon (a massive time and sanity saver!)

They'll keep you up to date with things like wait times and they'll be there to answer your questions. They'll also advise you when to do things, like get your medical, so it's all done at the right time.

DO YOU NEED AN AGENT?

You can apply for your visa yourself – many of my friends with straightforward applications did and it worked fine. If you have the time to dedicate to the paperwork, then it's an option. The benefit is that you save the money, but the downside is it can take longer (as you have to figure everything out yourself) and you run the risk of delays and more costs if you don't complete the various stages correctly.

Even if you plan on doing your own application, there's still value in speaking to an agent before you begin. A quick chat before you start will either confirm that you know what you're doing, or it'll make you realise there's more to the application than you thought – either way it's worth the effort.

COUNTING THE COSTS

Agents cost less than people tend to think. Our agent fee was less than 15 per cent of

our overall move budget (that included shipping, flights, visa costs for five of us, a month-long holiday let, hire car, insurance etc.). I see people in forums talking about agents quoting thousands of pounds but often these cases are where agents have added extra services to the quotes that are optional.

The only way to get an accurate quote is to speak to a few agents and get quotes that you can compare. But the price isn't the only thing you need to consider when picking an agent...

PICKING THE RIGHT AGENT

As with all industries, there are agents who will go above and beyond to help you, and those who don't. Don't settle on the first agent you find on Google – you need to speak to quite a few before you decide which one is right for you.

It's important to make sure you only choose agents that are registered with the Migration Agents Registration Authority (www.mara.gov.au). Registered agents are regulated and the Authority oversees their code of conduct. Immigration law is a complex and fast moving subject, so you need to know you're appointing an expert to take your visa application forward. A quick Google also shows you many horror stories from people who've had bad experiences with unregistered agents. >>

If you need New Zealand immigration advice, Catherine Albiston, Registrar of Immigration Advisers recommends that it is best to use a licensed immigration adviser. She says: "New Zealand licensed advisers have specialist expertise and have met competency standards. They follow a professional code of conduct that requires them to be honest, professional and respectful, provide you with a written agreement and on-going timely updates, and charge fees that are fair and reasonable. Licensed advisers vary in expertise, the fees they charge and the level of service they offer, so speak to a few advisers before you decide which one best meets your needs."

The Immigration Advisers Authority (IAA) website provides a free public register of licensed advisers (iaa.ewr.govt.nz/PublicRegister/Search.aspx) and further information.



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When we were planning our move, I spoke to at least six agents. A couple tried to fob me off by sending me to the eligibility checker on their website instead of just talking to me and answering my questions. Another got information wrong about which states needed our occupation – they were easy to rule out as I knew more than they did!

Another told me we weren't eligible and showed no interest in working out whether there was an occupation out there to suit our skills, which it turned out, there was! Then there were those who weren't interested in talking to me until I'd paid them some money. Again, easy to rule out as at this stage. I wasn't ready to 'buy' – I just wanted reassurance and some questions answered.

I carried on calling until I found an agent who was happy to chat to me and answer all of my questions. Over the period of a week, I called back and emailed a few times and each time was greeted with great advice and no demands to sign up with them. That was the point I knew I'd found my agent (and she has now gone on to become my trusted business colleague too!)

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Before you speak to an agent, do some research. Check if your job is on the Skilled Occupation List (SOL) or the Consolidated Sponsored Occupations List (CSOL). Next, Google 'State Migration Plan' for any states you're interested in moving to and see if your occupation appears on their list of occupations in demand. This way you have some basic knowledge before you start calling.

Here are some questions to ask:

- Is my occupation on the SOL?
- Is my occupation in demand in any of the states?
- What are the visa wait times?
- What's involved in the skills assessment

for my occupation and how much does this cost?

- What visa options are open to me and are there any conditions I need to be aware of?
- Will I need to take the International English Language Test?
- What are the visa costs?
- What other costs can I expect to pay in addition to your fee and the visa costs?
- What are your fees and how are these broken down into stages? What happens to fees if I'm rejected at any stage?
- Are there any indications my occupation may be taken off the skills list in the next year?
- If I'm not eligible, what advice can you give me?

Finding the right migration agent can take a huge amount of pressure off you, leaving you free to concentrate on the 101 other things you need to do to move to the other side of the world. For me, it was worth every penny. 🇺🇸

■ **Karen Bleakley is a Brisbane-based travel writer and founder of Smart Steps to Australia – a new website helping UK families navigate their way to a dream life in Australia. For migration tips, checklists, step-by-step-guides, a shop of moving abroad essentials, a list of reliable experts and a supportive community to help you through visit www.SmartStepstoAustralia.com**

