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Asian opportunity

Matthew Johns never thought he would one day be working as an insurance broker in Vietnam.

By Cyndi Tebbel

Matthew Johns left high school intent on continuing his studies. He’d been accepted at university and was about to embark on the first leg of what would have been his teaching career.

Instead, he applied for a 12-month deferral and dipped a toe into the school-leavers’ job market. “It was either banking or insurance,” Matthew remembers.

He quickly landed in a junior position with General Accident Insurance and never looked back. “I liked the job, the freedom and a bit of money,” he says.

Matthew spent four years there before an opportunity in broking came up with Alexander Stenhouse, which later became one of the Aon companies.

He started there in January, 1990 and today the 39-year-old South Australian is a Divisional Manager, Corporate Risk Services, Aon.

Based in Adelaide, Matthew has worked with clients in the transportation, manufacturing and construction industries, and now leads a team of six energy and utilities specialists.

Matthew says that his experience working “across the spectrum” has given him a greater understanding of the wider business community and client needs.

Honesty, integrity, hard work and “delivering on promises” form Matthew’s work ethic.

“Set the agenda for what you want to achieve, build good relationships and ensure you communicate with your client all the way through,” he says.

Vietnam

Matthew received the opportunity to give his communication skills a workout in mid-2007, when he was offered the role of director, sales and business coordination in Aon’s Vietnam bureau.

He travelled there with his partner, Rebecca,

and 18 months later the couple returned to Adelaide with their baby boy, Jesse.

“Aon already had well-established offices in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, but they wanted someone to help develop the growing western book and community,” he says.

While the insurance industry in Vietnam is about 40 years old, Matthew says it’s not yet as sophisticated as the Australian market and buyers are still unfamiliar with some concepts.

“Directors and officers liability insurance was only introduced during the time I was there, for example, so it was important to help clients understand what they’re buying,” he says.

That can be tricky if your command of Vietnamese is limited, as Matthew explains. Fortunately, the team he worked closely with all spoke very good English.

“I was heavily reliant on them. I toyed with the idea of having lessons, but I wouldn’t have been able to master it enough to engage in discussions with Vietnamese clients,” he says.

Covering Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City gave Matthew the advantage of being able to use weekends and holidays to travel the country and meet new people.

“The Vietnamese are fabulously friendly, the food and weather are great, and the beaches are beautiful,” he says.

More overseas travel?

His advice to those who might be entertaining the idea of working in a different country? “Go for it!

“If someone had told me three years ago that I’d be working in Vietnam, I’d have laughed. But now I’m more open to everything,” he says.

“I’ve got an important job to do here now, but there are great opportunities at Aon. I would certainly consider to do more work for Aon overseas, if the opportunity presents itself in the future.”

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