



# The HOMEcoming reality

What it's really like returning to work in Aotearoa

# Introduction

## Coming back to New Zealand after living abroad...

it's one heck of a journey, isn't it? Whether you've spent years building your career in London's financial district, navigating the tech scene in Silicon Valley or exploring opportunities across Asia, the decision to return home often comes with a complex mix of expectations and unknowns.

At HOME Recruitment, we get it. We've walked that path ourselves. The questions swirl: Will my international experience be valued? How will the salary compare? What about career progression? Work culture? That all-important work-life balance we Kiwis hear so much about?

The journey back to Aotearoa is deeply personal. For some, it's about reconnecting with whānau and putting down roots after years of exploration. For others, it's about bringing global expertise back home and contributing to New Zealand's growth. Whatever the motivation, making the leap involves navigating both practical realities and emotional transitions.

To bust the myths and uncover the real stories, we surveyed professionals who have made the move back to Aotearoa after working overseas. No sugar coating, just honest insights from people who've navigated the transition home; the good, the unexpected and everything in between.

We wanted to get beneath the surface of those polite conversations at BBQs and networking events, where returnees might gloss over the challenges they've faced. This report digs deeper, exploring what it's really like to transition from being a Kiwi abroad to a global Kiwi back home.

This report paints an authentic picture of what returning professionals can truly expect when coming back to the New Zealand workforce, challenges common misconceptions and provides valuable guidance for both returnees and the organisations looking to hire them.



# About the survey

Our survey captured responses from professionals who had returned to New Zealand after working overseas. These are people who've lived the transition; they've packed up their overseas lives, navigated the logistics of relocating (often with families in tow) and rebuilt their professional identities back on Kiwi soil.

The participants brought home experiences from across the globe:

## Previous regions worked:

UK/Europe (48%), Asia (16%), Australia (19%), North America (10%), and other regions (6%)

## Time spent overseas:

10+ years (45%), 5-10 years (19%), 2-5 years (29%), and less than 2 years (6%)

## Primary motivation for returning:

Family reasons (52%), lifestyle change (32%), career opportunity (3%), work visa expired (3%), and other reasons (10%)

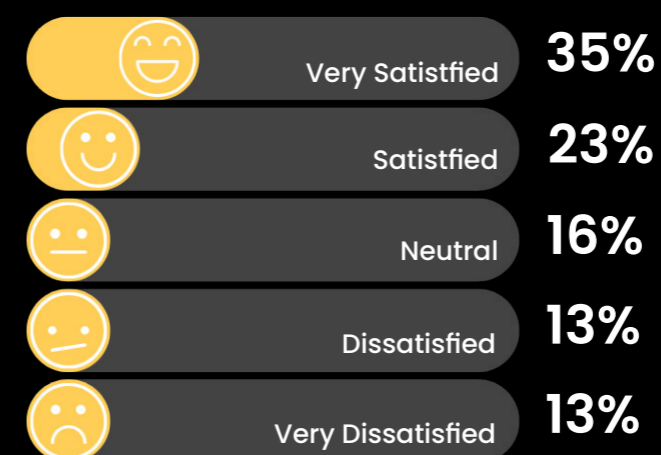
Nearly half of our respondents had spent more than a decade building their careers overseas. These weren't OEs but substantial career investments abroad. The majority were pulled back to New Zealand by personal connections rather than professional opportunities, which creates a particular dynamic when re-entering the workforce.

# Key findings vs. expectations

## 1. The satisfaction reality: Most are happy they came home

The big question on everyone's mind: 'Will I regret coming back?' Our survey reveals that for most returnees, the answer is a resounding 'no.' Despite the inevitable challenges of transition, the majority express genuine satisfaction with their decision to return to New Zealand.

Let's break it down:



This means nearly 6 out of 10 returnees feel they made the right call in coming home, even after experiencing the reality of the transition. This overall satisfaction exists despite specific pain points around compensation or career development that we'll explore later.

Interestingly, satisfaction rates vary significantly depending on where people returned from:

**Highest satisfaction:** Returnees from Asia (80%)

**Strong satisfaction:** Returnees from Australia (67%) and North America (67%)

**Lowest satisfaction:** Returnees from UK/Europe (47%)

This regional variation likely reflects the different gaps in lifestyle, compensation and work culture between these regions and New Zealand. The relatively high satisfaction among North American returnees is somewhat surprising given the larger salary differentials typically experienced by this group, suggesting that non-financial factors are playing a significant role in their overall satisfaction.

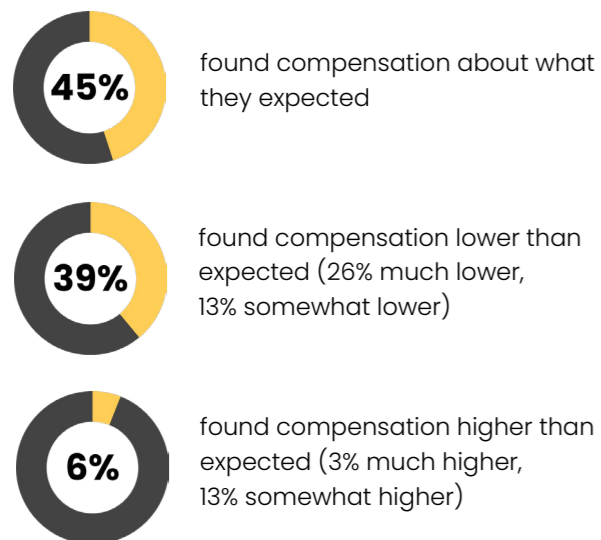
### The inside scoop:

For the majority, the emotional and lifestyle benefits of being back in Aotearoa outweigh any professional compromises they've had to make.

## 2. The money talk: The compensation reality

Let's address the elephant in the room first... money. It's often the first concern raised when contemplating the move back to New Zealand, and with good reason. The global salary variations can be substantial, with Kiwis in places like the US tech sector, London finance or Singapore's corporate world often commanding significantly higher packages than their New Zealand counterparts.

So how does the NZ pay check stack up to expectations?



Nearly half of returnees had realistic expectations about what they'd earn back home, suggesting they'd done their homework before making the move. However, more than a third experienced some level of negative surprise when it came to their pay packet. The fact that 16% found compensation higher than expected is an interesting counterpoint to the common narrative about New Zealand's lower salaries, suggesting that in certain sectors or roles, competitive compensation is possible.



Yet, surprisingly, there's not a perfect correlation between compensation disappointment and overall satisfaction. Many of those who experienced lower-than-expected compensation were still satisfied with their return decision overall. This suggests that for many, the non-financial aspects of returning home; family connections, lifestyle and wellbeing, provide value that outweighs the financial adjustment.

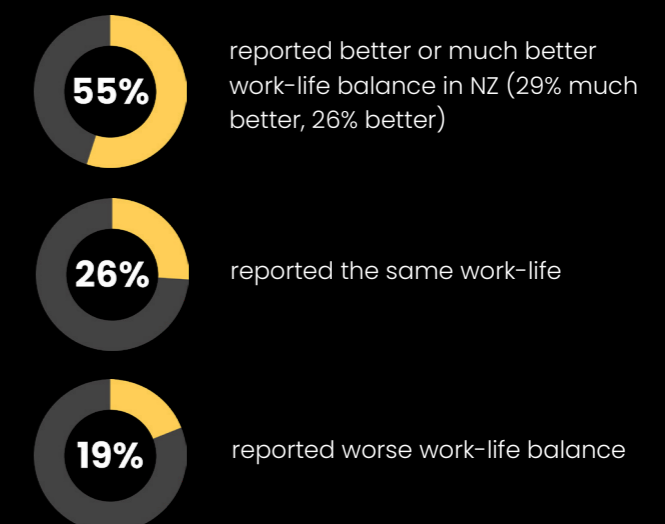
This dimension represents one of New Zealand's strongest workplace advantages, with more than half of returnees experiencing an improvement. For many, this means more time with family, more opportunity to enjoy New Zealand's natural environment and generally less stress around work demands.

## 3. The work experience: NZ vs. overseas

While compensation often gets the spotlight in discussions about returning home, the day-to-day work experience is equally important and arguably has a greater impact on long-term satisfaction. We asked returnees to compare various aspects of their working lives in New Zealand versus their overseas experiences, and the results paint a nuanced picture of trade-offs and advantages.

### Work-life balance: A mixed but mostly positive picture

New Zealand's reputation for prioritising work-life balance appears generally deserved, with a majority reporting improvement in this area:



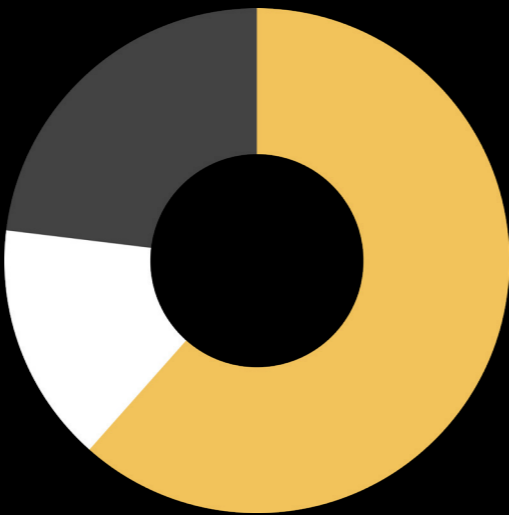
However, it's worth noting that nearly one in five returnees actually found work-life balance worse in New Zealand, challenging the universal assumption that New Zealand always offers a more balanced lifestyle.



## Flexible working options: A strong positive

Similarly, New Zealand employers appear to excel at offering flexible work arrangements, an increasingly important factor for today's professionals:

- 62%** reported better or much better flexibility in NZ (23% much better, 39% better)
- 23%** reported the same flexibility
- 16%** reported worse flexibility



This represents one of New Zealand's clearest workplace advantages, with nearly two-thirds of returnees experiencing improved flexibility compared to their overseas roles. This flexibility encompasses remote work options, flexible hours and accommodations for family needs, creating a more adaptable and supportive work environment than many returnees experienced overseas. As work-life integration becomes increasingly important to professionals globally, this advantage represents a significant competitive strength for New Zealand employers.

### The inside scoop:

"Work life balance, plenty of WFH opportunities, not too demanding, virtually no work after 5pm and weekends. In SE Asia offices are open and have people working until at least 10 pm, by choice. Working a 9-5 or to 6pm is considered rigid and lazy, and you are not committed to the team."

## Career development opportunities: A significant challenge

Perhaps unsurprisingly given New Zealand's smaller market size, career development represents one of the more challenging aspects of returning:

- 29%** reported better or much better career development in NZ (6% much better, 23% better)
- 23%** reported the same career development
- 48%** reported worse or much worse career development (42% worse, 6% much worse)

Nearly half of returnees perceive fewer opportunities for advancement and professional growth compared to their overseas experience. This reflects New Zealand's smaller economy and flatter organisational structures, which can mean fewer steps on the corporate ladder and potentially less specialised roles. However, it's notable that more than a quarter of returnees actually found better career development opportunities in New Zealand, suggesting that with the right role and organisation, meaningful career progression is certainly possible despite the market's smaller size.

### The inside scoop:

"Opportunity does exist in NZ. You might have to work harder to create it, but it is here if you have the right attitude."

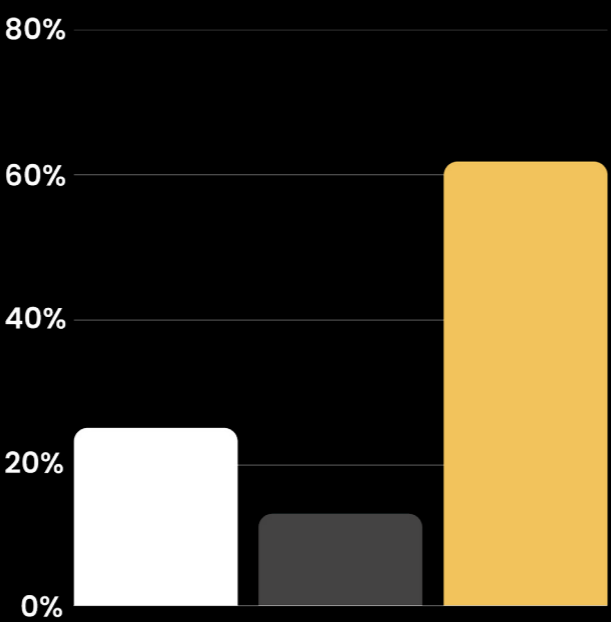


# Total benefits package: The biggest downside

Benefits package show the most significant negative comparison to overseas

- 25%** reported better or much better benefits in NZ (6% much better, 19% better)
- 13%** reported the same benefits
- 62%** reported worse or much worse benefits (39% worse, 23% much worse)

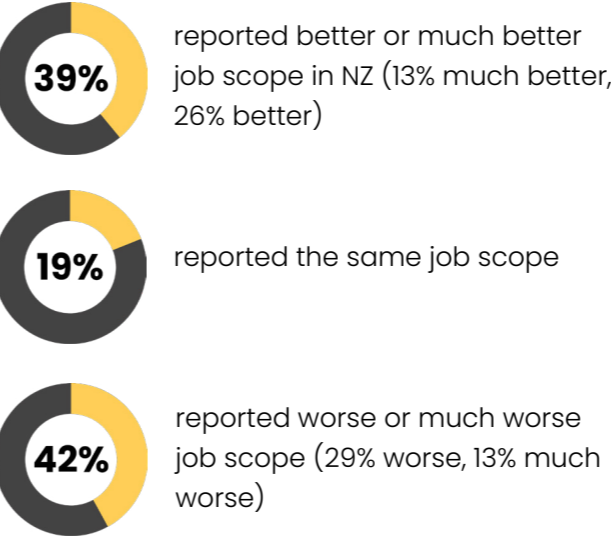
This represents the area where returnees experienced the greatest disappointment compared to their overseas packages. While base salary is one aspect of compensation, the broader benefits package, including health insurance, retirement contributions, bonuses, equity and perks, often represents significant additional value that many returnees found lacking in New Zealand.



The fact that nearly two-thirds of returnees report worse benefits packages highlights a potential area where New Zealand employers could improve their offerings to better attract and retain internationally experienced talent.

# Job scope/responsibility: Mixed picture

When it comes to actual role content and responsibility levels, the results are more evenly distributed:



Interestingly, while more respondents reported decreased responsibility (42%), a substantial number (39%) actually experienced increased responsibility upon returning to New Zealand. This polarised experience likely reflects New Zealand's smaller teams and less specialised roles, which can mean broader responsibilities in some contexts, but fewer opportunities for deep specialisation in others. For returnees, this suggests the importance of carefully evaluating potential roles to understand whether they'll offer the opportunity to take on greater responsibility or if they might



## 4. The recognition factor: How NZ values international experience

One of the biggest concerns for returnees is whether their international experience will be valued in the New Zealand job market. After all, many spent years developing expertise in global markets, working with multinational companies and building skills in competitive environments. Will New Zealand employers recognise and value this investment?

Looking at the available data, we can see that a significant number of returnees felt their international experience was only 'somewhat valued' or actively 'undervalued' in the New Zealand job market.

This represents a significant disconnect between the potential value that internationally experienced professionals can bring to New Zealand organisations and the perception of that value in the local market. Many returnees describe frustration at having their global experience viewed with scepticism or as irrelevant to the New Zealand context.

### The inside scoop:

'A common misconception is that your expertise and experience will be sought after and get you jobs. It is looked upon with suspicion and potentially expensive. I worked for Alibaba, one of the largest operations in the world, and some recruiters here didn't know who they were. My background, experience and skills were assumed to come with a high salary, and I couldn't dispel that notion.'

Some returnees even described scenarios where their international experience was seen as a threat rather than an asset.

### The inside scoop:

'Overseas experience is often not valued, but seen as a threat to others.'

This undervaluation represents both a personal challenge for returnees and a missed opportunity for New Zealand organisations that could be better leveraging global expertise and connections. For returnees, it can mean starting lower on the career ladder than expected or struggling to have their expertise recognised and utilised.

### What this means for you

So what can we learn from these insights? Whether you're contemplating the move home or looking to hire returning Kiwis, understanding these realities can help you navigate the transition more successfully.

### For professionals considering the move home

The journey back to Aotearoa is likely to bring both challenges and rewards. Being prepared can make all the difference between a rocky transition and a smooth landing.

## Before you return:

# 01

### Set realistic compensation expectations:

Research current market rates for your role in NZ, especially if returning from high-salary markets like North America. Use salary guides, connect with recruiters and talk candidly with peers who've made the move. Understanding the specific salary range for your role and experience level will prevent shock when reviewing offers.

# 02

### Consider the total package:

While base compensation may be lower, factor in the lifestyle benefits, work-life balance and reduced working hours. Calculate the true value of having more personal time, less commuting and proximity to family and friends. Remember that 55% of returnees report better work-life balance... there's real value there.

# 03

### Prepare to articulate your value:

Be ready to clearly explain how your international experience adds specific value to NZ employers. Practice translating your global experience into local relevance; what specific skills, perspectives or connections will benefit NZ organizations?

# 04

### Network before you land:

Connect with professionals in your field who have made the transition back. LinkedIn, industry groups and returnee communities can provide invaluable insights and potential job leads. Many successful transitions happen through connections rather than applications.

# 05

### Be strategic about timing:

Consider how your overseas experience level translates to the NZ market. Is there an optimal career stage or market condition for your return? Sometimes timing your return to align with specific projects or market needs can improve your prospects.

After returning:

01

**Focus on flexibility:**  
Leverage NZ's strength in flexible working arrangements. Our survey shows this is a genuine advantage of the NZ workplace with 62% reporting better flexibility. Embrace it and include flexibility in your job search criteria.

02

**Be patient with the job search:**  
Finding the right role that values your international experience may take time. Don't panic if the perfect fit doesn't materialise immediately.

03

**Consider how you present your experience:**  
Frame international experience in terms of specific value-add rather than prestige. Instead of 'I worked at Google in Silicon Valley', try 'I developed skills in rapid scaling and lean product development that could help NZ companies expand internationally.'

04

**Be open to lateral moves:**  
Sometimes a step sideways can open more paths forward in the NZ context. With 48% reporting worse career development opportunities, being flexible about your next role may be necessary, but doesn't mean you won't find fulfilling work.

05

**Leverage the returnee community:**  
Connect with others who have made the transition for support and opportunities. The shared experience creates a natural network and can provide both emotional support and practical leads.

**Pro tip:**  
'When I first returned to NZ it was definitely a shock to the system to see the huge pay disparity between NZ salaries and the salaries of equivalent roles in the States. Because of that I jumped at the first role that sounded like it aligned with my skills, interests, etc however, this quickly changed once I was in the role. The positive was the way the company understood the complexities of a young family and the flexibility they have regarding a work/life balance.'

For employers hiring returnees

Returnees represent a valuable talent pool with unique perspectives and global experience. Understanding how to attract, integrate and retain these professionals can give your organization a competitive advantage.

01

**Value international experience meaningfully:**  
Develop specific ways to leverage global perspectives. Consider how a returnee's experience might help with international expansion, process improvement based on global best practices or bringing fresh thinking to established ways of working.

02

**Be transparent about compensation:**  
Clarity helps set appropriate expectations from the start. Open conversations about the realities of the NZ market compared to overseas can prevent misalignment and disappointment. Remember that 39% of returnees found compensation lower than expected. Addressing this proactively is crucial.

03

**Highlight your flexibility advantage:**  
Leverage New Zealand's strongest workplace benefit; the work-life balance and flexibility that 62% of returnees rated better than overseas. Make this a central part of your employer value proposition when recruiting international talent. Go beyond generic statements to outline specific policies such as flexible hours, remote work options or family-friendly arrangements. Share real examples of how your organisation supports employees in creating sustainable work-life integration. For returnees weighing financial trade-offs against lifestyle benefits, this can be the deciding factor.

# 04

## Create clear career pathways:

Address the career development concern with transparent progression opportunities. Since 48% of returnees report worse career development opportunities in NZ, showing concrete growth paths within your organisation can be a major differentiator. Consider creating tailored development plans that leverage their international experience. Be explicit about how skills gained overseas can be applied and developed in the New Zealand context.

# 05

## Consider returnee-specific onboarding:

Help returnees transition smoothly into the NZ work context. Recognise that they're navigating multiple transitions simultaneously, not just a new job but often a new home, schools, social networks and more. A supportive onboarding that acknowledges these complexities can significantly improve retention. Consider assigning mentors who have also returned from overseas to help new returnees navigate both workplace and wider reintegration challenges.

# 06

## Review benefits structures:

While base compensation may be market-constrained, competitive benefits can help bridge the gap. With 62% of returnees reporting worse benefits packages in NZ, there's significant room for improvement here. Consider flexible benefits that allow returnees to prioritise what matters most to them. Think beyond traditional benefits to consider what would be most valuable to those rebuilding their lives in New Zealand.

## The conclusion

Returning to work in New Zealand after time overseas brings a mix of challenges and rewards. While compensation and career development opportunities may not always meet expectations, the gains in work-life balance, flexibility and lifestyle benefits lead to overall satisfaction for the majority of returnees.

The decision to return to New Zealand is primarily driven by personal rather than professional factors, with family reasons (52%) and lifestyle changes (32%) accounting for the vast majority of motivations. Those who approach the transition with realistic expectations about the financial trade-offs appear to have the most positive experiences.

Our survey highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of the New Zealand employment landscape for returnees. Flexibility and work-life balance emerge as clear advantages, while benefits packages and career development opportunities present ongoing challenges. Regional differences in satisfaction are notable, with returnees from Asia reporting the highest satisfaction levels (80%), followed by those from Australia and North America (both 67%), while those returning from the UK and Europe reported the lowest satisfaction levels (47%).

Whether you're a Kiwi contemplating the journey home or an employer looking to tap into the valuable pool of internationally experienced talent, understanding these realities will help you navigate the transition more successfully.

## Final thought:

For most returnees (58% satisfied overall), the ability to combine family connections, lifestyle benefits and professional opportunities, even if different from those overseas, ultimately makes the journey home worthwhile. As one respondent put it: "You might have to work harder to create opportunity, but it is here if you have the right attitude."



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