

Where in the world?

A-STARS Advisors co-founder Robert Quinlivan reflects on the 28-year career that has taken him from Perth to New York, London, Tokyo, Seoul and Hong Kong.

BY ALEX WRIGHT



BY TAKING EVERY opportunity that came his way, Robert Quinlivan FCA opened up a global career. In that 28-year career, he has lived and worked in Australia, the US, Japan, England, South Korea and Hong Kong – with periodic bouts of readjustment.

A taste for expat life

After graduating from the University of WA in 1989 with a commerce degree majoring in accounting and finance, Quinlivan joined KPMG in Perth, working in audit and insolvency. His first taste of the expatriate life came on secondment to KPMG in New York.

Seven years later, while running the audit and advisory division in the firm's financial services practice, Quinlivan was recruited to Merrill Lynch in Tokyo.

"I hadn't really thought about moving to Tokyo and I didn't speak Japanese, but I went through the interview process and ended up moving there," he says. "I thought if it didn't work out then I would just get on the next plane home."

Culture shock

Quinlivan had to deal with the culture shock of a new country, of joining one of the world's biggest investment banks and of the Asian financial crisis. He admits it was a case of sink or swim.

Having risen to the top, he enjoyed four years there before being asked to go to London in 2001 as a director. It was another year of reorientation. The world was coming down from the dotcom boom. His wife gave birth to his first child a week before the move. Then, as he was getting to grips with the new role, 9/11 happened "and the world changed".

Then in 2003 he got the call again, to move back to Tokyo into an expanded internal audit role with Merrill Lynch Japan Securities. Two years later a former colleague who had left to join Barclays Global Investors Japan encouraged him to apply for the role of country CFO – too good an opportunity to pass up.

In 2009, in the middle of the global financial crisis, Quinlivan was on the move again, this time to Barclays Global Investors (BGI) in London as head of financial planning and analysis for Europe. But within months BGI was taken over by Blackrock, and Quinlivan returned to Asia with Macquarie Securities Korea in Seoul before his latest posting in Hong Kong as Macquarie Group's CFO for Asia in 2013.

Amazing journey

In February however, Quinlivan decided to throw his lot in with fellow Aussie

and ex-IP Morgan high-flyer Simon Sywak. Their new venture, A-STARS Advisors, is the culmination of 28 years' experience. It advises investment banks, asset managers, family offices and fintech companies on business strategy, operations, IT and financial and regulatory matters, as well as distributing and supporting innovative financial markets software.

"There's never been a dull moment," he says of his career. Working in so many foreign markets requires learning each market's nuances and interpretations of regulations.

"My strategy throughout has been to observe, listen and learn," he says. It's all about learning how the business culture in that particular country and company works."

Quinlivan, who is a board member and treasurer of AustCham Hong Kong and Macau, has also been thankful for the support of his wife and four children, three of whom are at boarding school back home in Perth. He has also found that learning a few words of the local lingo has helped.

"I learnt a bit of Japanese and Korean," he said. "And your colleagues appreciate it if you make the effort." ●

ALEX WRIGHT is a London-based business journalist.