

Looking down under

Recruitment difficulties within the embryonic US market present a conundrum for firms, but as **Joanne Christie** finds out for **INTERGAMINGi**, Australia could provide at least part of the solution

AS states across the US open their doors to online betting and gaming, there's a huge amount of optimism within the gambling industry about the enormous potential of the market.

But there's one big problem for those companies looking to either set up new online businesses or expand across state lines: talent. In a nation where most forms of interactive gambling have been shut down for more than a decade there's a distinct lack of people with the right skills.

This is particularly problematic for US firms, which are faced with intense competition from European operators entering the market with a huge head start in terms of both online experience and the ability to move people around within their organisations.

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Gerry O'Sullivan, director of leadership at igaming recruitment firm **Pentasia**, which has a dedicated US operation, says although many US firms' first preference is to hire US nationals, this is going to become increasingly unrealistic as the market grows.

"If we look at it from a total market point of view, it is very clear that the quantity of talent available falls way short of the demand for that talent, so going forward US nationals/green card holders will not fill all the vacancies that will be created," he says.

The problem is that even if firms are willing to look further afield for the right people, getting them into the country can be very difficult. One of the main visa categories for foreign workers in speciality occupations, the H-1B visa, is heavily oversubscribed and the government allocates just 65,000 visas, plus an additional 20,000 only open to those with master's degrees, each year on a lottery basis.

This year there were 190,098 applications.

"Because it is a lottery, it's a risk that a lot of employers don't want to take," says O'Sullivan.

This has led some companies to seek out US nationals who've been working in the industry abroad to try and tempt them back, and also consider strategies such as offshoring parts of their online business, using interims and

contractors, and training staff with digital skills from other industries, says O'Sullivan.

There is, however, another option that could prove a viable alternative: hiring staff from Australia. Like many European countries, Australia also has an established igaming market but unlike Europe, it's relatively easy to obtain a visa for an Australian candidate wanting to work in the US.

Alongside a trade deal signed between Australia and the US in 2005, a new visa category was set up, the E-3 visa, that allows Australians to work in the US.

The E-3 is comparable to the H-1B visa but crucially, it is far more readily available. The annual quota for E-3 visas is 10,500; last year, only 5,657 were granted and the previous year, 5,609. So if a firm finds a candidate who is eligible — someone in a specialty occupation with a bachelor's degree or equivalent related to the field — they are highly likely to be approved.

"The quota for the E-3 has never filled up whereas the H-1B fills up every year," says founder of New York immigration law firm, **Douglas Lightman**. "The H-1B is restrictive in terms of you can only apply — assuming the quota is filled, which it almost always is in the first five days of April — April 1 for an October 1 start date."

The E-3 has a number of other advantages, he adds: "The E-3 is much more accommodating than the H-1B because it is quicker to obtain and it is less costly in terms of the application process and typically it undergoes less scrutiny."

O'Sullivan says Pentasia has identified the potential talent pool in Australia, but that many US firms remain unaware of the opportunity.

"Australia has an existing igaming market and Australians are easier to get into the US because of special relationships that are historical," he says.

"My personal experience has been that at the company level many have not been aware of the relative ease of Australians getting the right to live and work in the US."

However, **Derek Macartney**, managing director at Australian recruiter **Betting and Gaming Recruitment**, says since the PASPA ruling he has been approached by a number of US firms: "I am not even actively marketing people, they are literally just coming to us and asking us for people."

He adds that the interest works both ways. "On the candidate side every week I am speaking to probably at least five to 10 people who want to move to the US."

One reason Australians are keen to move to the US is the decline in opportunities at home. While the igaming market in Australia is

firmly established, in recent years government crackdowns and tax changes have led to a number of verticals shutting down and forced consolidation in the industry.

This has had a knock-on effect on the number of roles available for candidates.

"It's definitely nowhere near as buoyant as it used to be four years ago when we had all these new brands coming into Australia wanting to grow and establish themselves, and with the consolidation in the industry there have definitely been quite a lot of people who have been made redundant or will probably be made redundant over the next six months or so," says Macartney.

Dean Shannon, the former Ladbrokes Australia CEO who started up new sportsbook **Neds** in Australia last October, says he had no difficulty recruiting for the company.

"With the Tabcorp/Tatts merger there are plenty of people from Tatts looking for work in Queensland," he says.

One trend US hirers have noted is that the scarcity of talent is leading to candidates demanding huge salaries. And while it's fair to say Australians are used to relatively high salaries — not just in igaming but across all industries — Macartney says Australians considering a move to the US are more attracted by the opportunity than the pay packet.

"A lot of people in that sector don't have great prospects of career development in Australia so they are probably more interested in going to the US from a career development perspective," he says.

O'Sullivan believes this holds true for many foreign nationals.

"The US is potentially a game changer from an online gaming and market point of view and people are excited to be part of that," he adds. "So non-Americans outside the US may take more of a chance in anticipation that if they are good they can carve their place in that new market."

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