



PROFMED

The Impact of Emigration on Profmed Membership

“Somewhere deep inside us, we know we are destined for something greater than strife”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

South African professionals remain in high demand from developing and especially developed nations on every continent. Our professionals have a reputation for being problem-solvers, hard workers and social and digital advertising is consistently trying to entice professionals to leave South Africa. Over the past few years, Profmed has also noted the concerning exit of professionals from its membership and target market. There is no doubt that South African business, communities and civil society are feeling the effects of South Africa's longstanding emigration and resultant brain drain. The “emigration of highly trained or qualified people” (Oxford Dictionary), has a direct correlation to local unemployment and South Africa's own competitiveness in the global economy; and therefore it is essential that more professionals are trained and retained. The tide is already turning, and Profmed's positive results despite this ‘draining of the well’ suggests a positive outlook for the business and for the professionals who are increasingly turning inward to root their professional lives in their native South Africa.

Signs of professional exit are everywhere, and discussions about emigration and it's possibilities are commonplace discussion between both young and older professionals. The emergence of South African professionals working remotely for international corporations or even working and living outside south Africa for large part of the year, also poses added pressure on the traditional Profmed target market. Healthcare coverage for professionals has to extend beyond the ‘normal’ borders of thinking and acting; to respond to increasingly popular nomadic careers. This is crucial to ensure that professionals are aware that Profmed isn't ‘normal’; it has responded quickly to the changing landscape provides access to their benefits both in and out of South Africa (even though this is limited to 150 days). 150 days is certainly an appealing offering considering that many young professionals choose to do 90 day stints – because of common visa regulations in various countries – before returning home (Ferreira).

There are always opportunities in the midst of crisis — as South Africans know well. Whether it's the nostalgia of coming home after the COVID-19 pandemic which isolated many from their South African loved ones; the stimulation of funds to SMMEs, or the fact that South Africa continues to be a significant hub for immigration (Migration Policy Institute), there is certainly a pool to be tapped into.

The emigration challenge – and it's opportunities:

South Africa, like many developing economies, has seen the exodus of its professionals. The most popular locations have been (and continue to be) the United Kingdom, United States and by the early 2000s, Australia and New Zealand became hot destinations (HSRC). Developed (generally Global North) nations are poaching skills due to their own deficiencies in filling key roles within their economies, no more so than healthcare professionals which since COVID-19 have become even more valuable worldwide. This last year in 2022, the UK indicated skills shortage for doctors and nurses to be 160 000 and indicated that the only way to fill this over the short term is to globally attract these skills (London journal of medicine); while Australia's employment issue is a strange one for South Africans to understand – many simply do not want to work. In recent times, the high skills fields in focus have been medicine, engineering and aviation – areas where South Africans particularly excel.

Contrasted with a decade of loadshedding (rolling electricity blackouts), incidences of violent crime (World Population Review), and unemployment rates which include 2.7% of graduates and 6.9% of other tertiary educated individuals, it would be easy to assume that South Africa's working landscape is under pressure. However, small and medium enterprises, once in a lifetime inventions, a watertight banking system, more students entering university than ever before (UNISA) and a growing, robust tax base mean that high quality life for professionals in South Africa can be possible; despite the negative statistics so often touted.

But the exit still continues; and rather than endlessly jostle between the Statistics South Africa release emigration statistics, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the World Bank Emigration Report and the United Nations Emigration Papers, which – like many multinational organizations courting South African professionals – tend to focus on the ‘doom and gloom’ story around South Africa's development.

The professionals who are staying are savvy, more of them are extremely socially and financially literate and especially with the scare of COVID-19; are realising and committing to the old cliché – “health is wealth”. For Profmed, this good news and the results are clear. Despite the rising cost of living, healthcare provision remains a priority. Profmed has gained 2654 new members in 2022 (while some competitors have found numbers contracting); and the important point is that they are 35 years old or younger. These professionals have long careers ahead of them; the likelihood of higher positions in coming years; and this group tends to stick to what they trust – if the service is strong, they stay (Trendmapping).

Challenges aside: the picture is still bright and hopeful. As per former president Thabo Mbeki's now famous phrase: “South Africa is alive with possibility”. Profmed is perfectly placed to grab these opportunities. It becomes essential (and indeed urgent), to place efforts into retaining the lifeblood consumer of Profmed. Even where there may be fewer professionals in the country, there are still 200 000 working professionals who remain. The growing GenZ group of new professionals entering the market is characterized by a real intent of building and contributing the successes of their own nations (TrendMapping), and the opportunity to advocate for growth at home, here in South Africa. These are individuals with skills are working together to solve long standing problems in new innovative ways.

One of the ways Profmed can support this pro-SA swing by younger professionals; is to leverage the modality of proud, professional South Africans. South Africans perform incredibly on the world stage. Siya Kolisi and his foundation consistently re-affirm the need to drive South African progress and innovation regardless of the immediate challenges you may be living in. Even amongst young medical doctors, the previous “oh no!” response to placement in rural hospitals has shifted to these young doctors using platforms like TikTok to document basic videos of handwashing, sterilizing of water, basic wound care and the like; turning ‘crisis’ into opportunity. And Profmed is already perfectly positioned in this space. The current documentary series which highlights the journey and successes of local athletes leans into the notion of Profmed as not only support – but a leader in shifting the current climate, highlighting the optimistic, the driven and the future of our country. There is always opportunity to expand upon these initiatives; especially to see higher spikes in already strong new membership numbers.

Train and retain

Emigration (and it's effect of ‘brain drain’) has a direct impact on Profmed's consumer, but we remain committed to support the healthcare of every professional so that they can focus on their career ambitions. Projections by the UN Population Division suggest our exit numbers are set to plateau while opportunities to make a real difference in the lives of every South African will make more of them stay. While the issue will persist, the potential to lead the story of professional success supported by Profmed is infinite.

References

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