



Bangkok

A phone call from Thailand proved to be a great business opportunity for recruitment company Transline, as managing director Paul Beasley and group sales director Daniel Hobbs told *Director*



Founded in 1989 by managing directors Paul Beasley, left, and Jon Taylor, recruitment business Transline supplies over 12,000 temporary industrial, driving and technical staff to companies across the UK every day. Based in Brighouse, West Yorkshire, the firm employs a total of 208 staff in Britain with a UK turnover of £108m last year.

Transline had already expanded into several overseas markets including Canada, Poland and Romania when Beasley received a phone call from a client who had relocated to Thailand. "He explained that in Thailand the temporary staffing function as we know it in Europe and North America just doesn't run the same," says Beasley. "He went over there and was concerned at what he saw: people not getting paid properly, with companies not paying employees but instead offering to lend them money at an interest rate... He wanted to put a proper structure in place in terms of the temporary staff function."



Sacred: Buddhist monks in saffron-coloured robes walk through one of Bangkok's many beautiful temples

Initially concerned by Thailand's track record on corruption, Beasley told the client that Transline wasn't interested. But their contact persuaded them to travel to Bangkok and see for themselves: "We had a look into what the client required and what we'd need to service them, and realised it was something we could achieve," he says.

GETTING STARTED

Transline's first priority was a detailed due diligence process to assess the risks: "It was a significant financial investment,

so we wanted to see if it was a sustainable market," says group sales director Daniel Hobbs. However, they first had to hurdle the language barrier: "We were quite fortunate because Daniel has some Thai family members, so that helped us," says Beasley.

It soon became apparent that the Thai business world can be difficult to navigate for non-Thai nationals, and that things happen more quickly when local staff members do the negotiating: "We were fortunate enough to have a Thai supervisor working for us in the UK who wanted to take on the

challenge," says Hobbs. "So, coupled with an experienced recruiter in Thailand we hired directly, we sent him in."

Finding a location for the business in Bangkok proved tricky; security considerations were a much higher priority than the company had expected: "We had threats that, if we put our office in a certain area, under no uncertain terms it would be burnt down," explains Hobbs. "So setting up there involves not just a financial risk but obviously risk to our personnel."

They also learned that the majority shareholder of the company must be a Thai national. "We've got our Thai employees as a nominated shareholder on our behalf," says Hobbs. "There's an agreement in place that – should we sell the company – any profits go back to Transline, as if we were a majority shareholder."

Beasley and Hobbs were also careful that, when they initially hired warehouse staff, they didn't make themselves overly visible to the workforce – as they wanted to be perceived as a Thai company with Thai values. "They don't



Ancient and modern: above, a pavilion in the King Rama IX Park, and, right, the Chao Phraya river



know who we are and, if they see a couple of western faces, straight away no one wants to talk to you," says Beasley. "But those barriers are starting to come down quite a lot."

CULTURE OF TRUST

The Thai culture is one based heavily on principles of trust and integrity, say Beasley and Hobbs – something the company turned to its advantage in attracting employees. "When word got around we were reputable, paying on time, treating people well, giving out free safety equipment and so on, people started recommending us," says Hobbs.

A weekly payroll also helped overcome that trust barrier. "That was unheard of in the Thai market, so it really enabled us to engage with workers, show them we trusted them and wanted them to work with us," he adds. And, although it costs the company more to do, Beasley agrees it was a good break-in initiative. "In terms of candidate attraction, it says 'come and work for us and you will get paid every week, but go work for someone

else and you'll get paid once a month,'" he says.

Transline now has 200 temporary staff in Thailand and remains focused on employee morale: "We put on a free lunch when we reached a milestone of 100 staff," says Beasley. "It cost us very little but you would not believe the appreciation the staff showed because they are not used to getting treated like that."

The result has been a high level of loyalty, but businesses must remain mindful of the way they go about providing for a Thai workforce, they explain: "We had to fight tooth and nail with our own staff to buy them a fridge for the office," says Hobbs. "The Thai workers don't want to see a lot of unnecessary spending... in their culture it is very much hand to mouth and they work hard for their money, so it's not a place where you can go and throw money and hope that's going to fix the problem."

It's also the norm for employees to work 12-hour shifts, six days a week – but still wish to work longer. "The client explained to us that you actually have to



Thai-style: clockwise from left, street food for sale, tuk-tuk drivers, and a vibrant street scene

discourage them from working seven days, because they would if you let them," says Hobbs. But, he warns that staff from outside Bangkok can sometimes leave suddenly: "They'll work hard then suddenly say 'thank you, I've earned my money, I'm going back home for a few months'," says Hobbs. "Then they'll come back and work for you again."

Transline has now opened a second site in Bangkok's Bang Na District and is looking to employ 700 temporary staff in the country before the end of the year. "By the time it gets to October we will be well in the black and in a position to start paying back the initial investment that we've made," says Hobbs.

Beasley advises other companies looking to expand to Thailand to do their homework first – then reap the rewards. "In terms of having a foothold in south-east Asia we've found it's been a great springboard," he says. "We're truly worldwide now – it's been a bold move to enter this market, but definitely one that's been worthwhile."

Behije Hassan

BANGKOK FACT FILE

Population
6.35 million

Currency
Thai baht

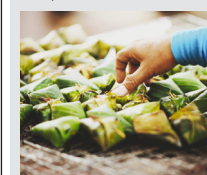
Language

"The main language is Thai, but there are many different dialects depending on what vicinity you come from," says Hobbs



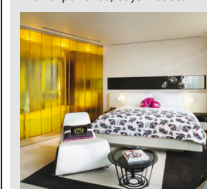
Sightseeing

"Do visit Siam Square and also The Grand Palace right in the centre of Bangkok," recommends Hobbs. www.siam-square.com and www.palaces.thai.net



Food

"The food is fantastic. The best places are the local establishments – you'll save money and get the true authentic Thai experience," says Hobbs.



Where to stay

The pair recommend the W Hotel. www.whotelbangkok.com

Getting there

PLUS "Thai Airways flies from London but we tend to use Emirates and Etihad. I fly from Manchester and Danny from London, so we meet in Dubai or Abu Dhabi," says Beasley. Or book through WEXAS at www.iod.com/travel (020 7838 5989).

Useful contacts

British Chamber of Commerce Thailand
www.bccthai.com