

# The Job Hunting Podcast

## [41. Escape to the country: Can remote work and the pandemic re-shape our cities and regional towns? - with Liz Ritchie](#)

Renata: Today is mid-July in Melbourne, and I had the opportunity to catch up with my friend Liz Richie. Liz and I worked together at CEDA, the Committee for Economic Development of Australia many years ago, and that's how we met, and we've been in touch ever since. Liz Richie is now the CEO of the Regional Australia Institute, and you may have heard of her if you are based in Australia, because she's all over the news. She's been interviewed many times over since covid started because all of a sudden, we are all thinking about moving to regional Australia. And if you are overseas, maybe that's a trend that's also happening in your country. We really don't need to be based in metropolitan areas anymore if we're going to be working from home. There could be a reason for you to want to move interstate or move somewhere closer to your parents or your family and friends, or just have a more relaxed lifestyle or a more affordable lifestyle.

Renata: There are many reasons why you would want to get away from metropolitan areas and into regional areas. And Liz is milking it for all it's worth. This is a job that's made for her. She is a regional girl, she was born and raised in regional New South Wales, and she will tell you a little bit about her beginnings in the beginning of this podcast. But, after she moved to Melbourne, she had a wonderful career working, not only for CEDA, where we both worked and loved the work that we do, it's a wonderful think-tank and a great MBA and way of meeting lots of people and knowing a lot of different sectors and industries very quickly. She was there for longer than I was, and then moved into a major bank in Australia called Westpac where she was the regional general manager, and then moved to Canberra to work for regional Australia Institute.

Renata: So that's just, you know, a snippet of all of the things she's done. You will find her on LinkedIn if you're a bit more curious about Liz's career. Liz is a winner of the Business News 40 Under 40 in WA. And she has been recognised many times over for her contributions to business, community, gender diversity. She's an advocate for women in the workforce and has worked relentlessly to support women across all of the jobs that she has done. She's a graduate of the Australian Institute of company directors and has a master of applied science in organisational dynamics from RMIT, as well as a bachelor of PR from RMIT as well. She'll tell you a bit about as well and why she decided to do public relations early on. She also completed the Institute of executive leadership and coaching certificate back in 2019.

Renata: And I'm not surprised with that. She's a wonderful leader and I'm sure she does that sort of coaching leadership that is so valuable these days. I think that this is a topic that will resonate with all of our listeners around the world. It might be something that you have the appetite to do right now, if you're currently in transition or it may be something that you could plan and do later on. Like I am thinking at the moment, my husband and I have always wanted to plan and do something like moving to a regional area, later on in life. So, stick around and there will be lots of links in the episode. Show notes for you to give you an idea, her website, regional Australia Institute has an amazing tool that lists lots of different areas, regions and towns across Australia, and has index them for liveability.

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- Renata: There's a Bohemian index, which I think is fantastic for somebody like my husband. We really need to look at that, but also employment, unemployment, the type of knowledge, skills, and number of business owners in different parts of Australia. It's such a great tool. If you are outside of Australia and considering one day coming to Australia to live, there is a migration page for the Australian regional Institute. And from that page, you might want to join their Facebook group. And I think that that would be a great one. If you're overseas and you can start communicating and asking questions and observing how migrants have adjusted to living in regional Australia. So lots of interesting links on the episode show notes. So wherever you found this podcast, it has been filmed. So it could be YouTube, but also Spotify iTunes, or my blog, make sure that you read the blog and the episode show notes to find those great links. So without further ado here is Liz Ritchie for you. Bye for now.
- Renata: You know, you're following me, everywhere I look there you are, because you are on ABC and the Herald sun and the Mamamia podcast and everywhere, because I think the same way that organisations are having to do those restructures people that have lost their jobs and even those who haven't, uh, you know, like Andre and I are thinking, is this the right time for us to do what we always wanted to do or is, um...
- Liz: And I'm interested in that when you say that's what you always wanted to do, like move out and get that property. I mean, how long has that been an idea in your mind?
- Renata: Well, not as long as it has been in your mind.
- Liz: Well, it was born in my mind darling.
- Renata: I know.
- Liz: But I'm interested. Can you remember a trigger point? Because that's really interesting data for us as a professional, a family, raising children, there's different milestones in a person's life where, you know, those ideas are formulated, but actually timing doesn't allow for that move.
- Renata: Well, my friends and I talk about it all the time.
- Liz: Hmm. Music to my ears.
- Renata: Yes. My friends who have more money than I do have already started buying property. So those that can afford to have two properties have already done so. So they have a smaller property in Melbourne, they sold their bigger property, have a smaller property in inner Melbourne. And they have a bigger property in Gippsland or Castlemaine or, even beyond Castlemaine is too close, but you know what I mean? Somewhere in the Mornington Peninsula, somewhere in Phillip islands, you know, around Melbourne. Right. So they have already started doing that. Others like me just talk about it all the time, because it will have to be a transition where we sell here and buy there. I can't have it both ways. Even though we have been...but it's the thing that Melbournians do Liz, you have to come and sit as an observer, to a brunch in Ellwood or Brighton or anywhere that I go to, we just sit there and we discuss strategies of how we are going to...

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Liz: Dream of ways to get out?

Renata: Yes, yes.

Liz: But see, I was that person and, you know, I actually thought that it was more based on the fact that a lot of my network were also country people and grew up in the country. And then, you know, we'd all done that, that Rite of passage to Melbourne and Sydney studied, et cetera, your beginning career. But we were always talking about that as well. And most of them, majority have done it in some way. There's only a few still kind of holding on for various reasons. And there's some who will never go back. For them, city life is for them. But what I'm interested in is, you know, and I'm interested in people who haven't been raised in regional Australia. What does it take to turn that switch on to say, you know, what is it that you're imagining in your mind, because this is really important stuff for us. And I'm happy to talk about this. In fact, I realised, I think you're already recording aren't you?

Renata: I record everything, and then we edit it.

Liz: The thing that's really interesting to me is that when we, and I'll talk about the campaign, when we do this, I'm actually getting research, from the council members. So the 12 council members getting city based staff and employees to tell me the answer to these exact questions, because they're my target market. So, you know, I don't need to convince regional people. Majority of them will find a way back somewhere somehow because it's kind of in their blood and they've got family connections and other connections...

Renata: None of the people that sit with me having branch have family connections, some are migrants, like I am. Others are Australians born and raised, but they are from interstate. They might be from Queensland. They might be from New South Wales and they've landed here, but they don't want to go back to where they came. They just want to go to Castlemaine. I have a friend who is obsessed with Castlemaine and the problem is some are obsessed with the West side of Victoria and the other ones with the North and the other ones with the East. And because we're such good friends that can't be. We have to congregate on one of the areas to make it easier for us as we get older.

Liz: It's just such a, perhaps I do need to come and sit in one of your brunches because what really interests me is what is it again about that imagined construct that it makes the East and the West and the North more attractive to each of your counterparts because there's something imagined or felt the experience that that's been had, because so much of any big moves in life, I think is the idea of the imagined future. How do you see that rolling out? And it's, and things are never as we envisage, there might be, there'll be elements of that, that come true. And there'll be elements that are really difficult that, you know, we didn't prepare for because you couldn't see that that hindsight is quite frustrating at times,

Renata: Especially with a big move like that. And I wonder if people are romanticising the idea of moving to countryside. So I want to take us sort of in the step-by-step kind of framework that I think would be ideal...

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- Liz: Is it ok to drink my tea?
- Renata: Well, I'm drinking mine, I have even a bigger cup than yours. So talking about, things that are ideal and looking at them in hindsight, when I think of the conversations that we used to have back in the day, and the job that you have now, I can't of a better job for you.
- Liz: I know. Thank you.
- Renata: Just the combination of being in Canberra and anything to do anything with the word regional, is just perfect, and I know how much you loved being in Perth and how much you loved working for CEDA. I loved CEDA as well, but this is just so you, so I wanted to ask you how, how did this happen? Tell us how you landed there. Tell the listeners who don't know you, you know, what a little bit about your background and how this is such a great role for you.
- Liz: Yeah. Thanks Renata. Well, the starting point is that it is a dream role. It's the place that I know I'm meant to be. And that is a really important starting point because it hasn't been easy, like any new leadership roles stepping into an organisation that has a past that is transitioning or needs to transition. It's been quite tough. And so the fact that this is where I know I need to be, and my passion is so aligned with the organization's purpose is that I know that if you can push through the hard days, the better days are ahead. And that I could not in all good conscience, not be the person to see that change occur. So that's possibly a good starting point. My background for people for our listeners is that I'm the youngest of six children from a beautiful family, farming family outside of Deniliquin. Deniliquin is Southern new South Wales, just over the border of Echuca Moama probably slightly more famous than Deniliquin, although Deniliquin did become famous for its Deniliquin world record Ute muster.
- Liz: So I'll talk about that in a moment, because yeah, so growing up in a country town, as you can imagine, I live by the saying that it takes a village to raise a child because, that was very much my upbringing, you know, outdoors, creative, lots of sport and recreation, family barbecues, you know, it really was an idyllic upbringing and having five older siblings, four brothers, one sister teaches you a lot about, resilience and standing your ground and standing up for what you believe in. And, you know, essentially being able to make sure that you get those, very important roast lamb seconds ahead of your brothers. So it was really idyllic. I went to the local primary school, which I loved and then went to Deniliquin high school up until year 10. And then my parents, we discussed for a number of years, whether going away was a good option.
- Liz: Some of my siblings had some hadn't, so it was very much, you know, it was my choice. And in the end for a variety of reasons, you know, we decided that was the right way to go. So I had two years in Melbourne at Caulfield Grammar, and that was an extremely important time in my life because not only was I exposed to a much greater, a broader world, it really opened my eyes. Caulfield Grammar was also transitioning from being a male only school to a coed. So I was, I think I was the third year intake of, females to join what was historically a male only school. So you can

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imagine that the change that the organisation was going through, the change that the gentlemen were going through. And of course we, as the very small percentage of females that were joining the school were also experiencing.

Liz: But I've reflected on that a lot throughout my career. And I think ultimately as a female leader, that experience and that exposure, certainly it helped me to communicate at all levels, male, female, regardless of age and stage. And that's also what being part of Deniliquin and that community gave me. And so that piece of never being afraid to ask questions, to speak to people who are, you know, much, much older than yourself, to learn all the time, to just have that sense of kind of curiosity. So I studied public relations at RMIT, which was a kind of natural step for me as well. I felt it was either journalism, or psychology. And I felt like I landed somewhere in the middle with doing public relations and loved that course. And then after university felt that I needed to travel, I really had a strong desire to go overseas and explore the world.

Liz: I had a very kind of adventurous. I've always had a very adventurous nature and I really wanted to do that. But it was perhaps an opportune out of the blue call from a family friend of mine who was in Deniliquin who had founded the Deniliquin Ute Muster. And this is an incredible story because Deniliquin is an agricultural region. And very much I guess, formed through the success of its agricultural background. And so when a region like that experiences countless droughts, they were, this is back in year two, well you're 2000 at the time, or it's probably the 1999. Actually the drought was significant. And so a group of locals came together to say, what can we do to put Deniliquin on the map and to help our community in a time of drought. And this group of volunteers had a few different town hall meetings, if you can imagine. And through that process of creation and innovation, the ideas came forth that Deniliquin was famous for its agricultural background and what was linked to that was Ute. And so the idea of holding a Guinness world record ute muster was formed. Sounds very obscure, but alas, a something...

Renata: Ute is a Australian creation as well, isn't it? But the car was the utility car was created here by what Ford or?

Liz: I kind of, I think it was Ford. Yeah, that's terrible. I should remember that. I can't remember, but yes. And it was very unique to our, I guess, agricultural background because farmers were famous for their variety of Utes. So it did work, like the idea, you could see the seeds of success in that just initial concept and then very quickly the community completely through volunteer effort held the first world record Ute muster with a big concert country, music concert, and lo and behold, they had people travel from all over the country. Over 2000 Utes came in the first year and the Guinness world record was set. It was underway.

Renata: Listeners. If you don't know what a Ute is, or if you want to see a picture of the world records, look at the episode show notes. I will certainly find one and add there for you. Just in case, you know we're listened in over 50 countries. So just in case people have no idea what a Ute is, look it up on the episode show notes.

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Liz: Or give me a call. So, the reason that's important is because it was the second year that my family friend who'd been, I think she was the tourism manager to Deniliquin at the time, contacted me and said, Liz, we need to employ a festival director for the second year. So that, after success in year one on volunteer effort, they realised they needed to have somebody to lead it. So I was extremely fortunate as a graduate, to come home and be the first festival director for the Deniliquin Ute muster. And it really was life changing because you talk about how I ended up where I am today. It really started in that role, because,

Renata: That role is not on your LinkedIn.

Liz: It needs to be on my CV. I talk widely about it, because I'm very proud of it. I'm very proud of it. I absolutely loved that role and the people that I worked with, the board, we're a volunteer board and we had hundreds of volunteers who gave of their time and helped me out in the office and just did whatever they could. And I guess for me, it instilled that whole notion of what is possible with a simple idea and human effort and capacity to make a difference. And though it's that thinking, it's that value set that stayed with me. And it just was so inspiring that it sort of propelled my thinking even back then, and that's 21 years ago, so I'm going to give away my age. And I literally back in those days, thought this is how I want to live. I want to live regionally and be able to make a difference. We didn't have the technology anywhere like we have today, but certainly that notion of somehow somewhere in my future, not only supporting regional development and economic development of regions, but to somehow get back to regional Australia and know that I was going to play a role. So it really did start back 21 years ago.

Renata: Wow. When I do an intro for this podcast, I'm going to list all of your jobs and your bio and your accomplishments. Otherwise, we're just going to go on and on forever here but it's such a great story.

Liz: I know, and you know I can talk, I can talk too long.

Renata: And I remember when we used to sit and talk about, you know, what we wanted to do after CEDA, even though we loved CEDA. And you used to say, you want to go back to, you know, regional Victoria or you want to work in the regions and you want to work in Canberra. I'm like that job doesn't exist. And they didn't tell you that because I, you know, wanted to be a supportive friend. I was like, I don't know what she's talking about. It just doesn't seem like it can be done. And I think that that feeling that we have, that I had for you individually as somebody who wanted to work in the regions or for the regions, also I have to admit continued on in roles that I had where I could influence policy, and I didn't. Most recently when I was at Monash university, for a year and a half, went back and forth to Sydney to participate in a project called the national outlook with CSI IRO and a bunch of organisations, including Monash university, looking at the future of Australia, looking at different scenarios. So it was really about policy levers that you could pull that would generate different outcomes for Australia, 40 years from now. And I love that concept of thinking what it is that we're doing now that, and what would that mean? How can we do modelling mathematical modelling? What it would mean for

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urban planning, what it would mean for climate, what it would mean for the way that we use in generate energy and blah, blah, blah. Even though we loved the policy levers that we used to call green and gold, which was gold regional.

Renata: When it came time to publish the report, it was watered down, because we didn't feel there was appetite politically for us to boost any of that. Now I say this because this was pre COVID. I'm not sure post COVID, if that is the same, you know. Are all of that data because the data is much bigger than what was then what's in the report. I would pull all of that data back again and say, okay, let's look at this again because remote work and the ability to, and the trust we are now building between employers and employees, is that we can give them this chance and make life more affordable as well. Affordability is part of the brunch discussion.

Liz: It is, and it should be, and I'm not surprised. I mean, that's what we hear frequently that it is about affordability, but it's also about a better lifestyle. I mean, you know, we discussed how much we love working at CEDA and I did, I loved that, but I never got past the commute. I hated the commuting. And I just thought this is such a waste of time. And then as the rise of, our iPhone addiction, you know, I just thought it was really sad that we'd, you know, be jammed in, hundreds of us jammed in on a tram or train, and there would be no interaction, no communication. I mean, I'm one of those frightening people that if you step into a lift with me, you'll end up in a three minute conversation and you know, this is, that's what I found so, I guess foreign about being in the city.

Liz: It's sort of the, I'm the person you sit next to on the aeroplane. And you know, you're going to end up in a 20 minute conversation because it's that interest of people that comes back to that community upbringing. And, you know, we live in dangerous times around social isolation and what this is doing, record levels of mental health issues, suicides that we're seeing sadly. And where's this all stemming from. I mean, I honestly believe that it's a lack of community and support that people are missing in their lives. That's no longer, we were running at such a pace that those things that nourish us and support our, own kind of internal systems to keep us healthy, and well, we're not spending enough time doing that. And I think a lot of it comes down to what I think can occur in that busy, busy, being busy, being busy in these jobs that predominantly, you know, are based in that, that rat race of beautiful Melbourne and Sydney don't get me wrong. I love the cities, but you, like myself would wouldn't have many friends and many colleagues who share that frustration with me. And we know it's true.

Renata: Now, as corporate people, we have always known that many of the jobs we have done, maybe not all of them, but many of them can be done remotely. Now we are in a situation where they have to be done remotely. Do you see this translating into more flexibility and potentially different policies that will allow people to make those decisions in their lives? What I'm trying to say here is can be, can people now start moving to country and not regret it? Because, you know, they need to make that change knowing that there will be government policy and employers that will want to employ them to work remotely or that they will find work in regional areas.

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- Liz: Yeah, absolutely. The short answer is that yes, I think the time is now, however, I would caution that with, you know, you do need to be prepared. You do need to have all of your different facets of your life lined up, so that you can be well supported in that move. Now, the experience of covid, as we've discussed, has absolutely fast tracked and catapulted us as a nation into what we call the future of work. We knew this was here. We just weren't utilising it in the way that perhaps we should or could have been. And so now, and the creation of the new initiative that we have through the RAI of course, which is called the regional Australia council of 2031, the idea was formed because I felt that corporate Australia had a really important role to play here, to demonstrate leadership and influence on how corporates and big business could prioritise regional Australia.
- Liz: Now this, you know, this seed of an idea I've had for probably two years, and really it's just been quite slow to build. And in fact, the timing of COVID only played into that. So if there is an upside, it has been that. That's not to downplay the devastation that the pandemic has obviously caused. And so I'm very heartened by the members that we do have and what I'm hearing from them of them, all of them currently and regularly putting out staff surveys to get a better understanding of what it is that, that their staff want. And how has this worked for them? How has flexibility impacted their lives, their work, and the consistent and overwhelming answer is people want more flexibility. They want more opportunity to work from home. That's the first step, the percentage of those people who've taken the next step, the way that you have and have started dreaming about, okay, does that mean I can work from regional Australia?
- Liz: We don't have that data yet, but this is what I'm about to work with my council. So we are actively designing the survey that we're going to work with my 12 members, and that is going to give us some very rich insights into an employee base that is traditionally city-based, traditionally CBD based. It will have a broad range of demographics, and we're going to get that true insight as to, well, what are you thinking and what would it take for you to move? And even if you're thinking about the move, how long might it be before you actually take that leap? What are the things you think you need to get organised? Because depending on your age bracket, depends on how many different aspects you have to get sorted. I mean, if you're a graduate, moving is second nature, they can pack their bags and get on the train and they're gone.
- Liz: You know, whereas if you have got a young family, there's many things that need to be sorted. There's school, there's childcare, there's support, there's a whole range of health and education services, community services that are going to be really important to that decision. So do I feel like we're at the precipice of change? Yeah, I do. It's really a very exciting time and we see that regions will be the beneficiary of this transformation. And we know that if we miss this opportunity now, it's probably going to be a very long time before it arises again. And so, that's the corporate sector, to talk about government that's been interesting as well, government for a long time have had, what's better known as a decentralisation policy with some

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mixed success. So this is essentially for listeners around the world that aren't familiar with Australia's decentralisation policy.

Liz: It was very much looking at government moving government agencies out to regional locations to offer better employment and hopefully to align, I guess, some of the priorities of those departments, such as department of ag or regional departments to their constituents, to be closer to the thinking. So, you know, rationally, there's a lot that makes sense about that, but the practicalities of moving people that don't want to be moved are really difficult. Just because they worked for the particular department doesn't mean they have an innate passion, the way that I may have to live and work in regional Australia. So the issue with the decentralisation policy is that if you're a person that that's what you dreamt of doing, fantastic. But if you weren't, it meant enormous upheaval for that department to recruit or for all the roles that needed to be replaced.

Liz: And for the people who didn't want to move because they were displaced and had to find new employment. So the issue with the government decentralisation policy from my perspective is that it removes choice. And I think that if we're going to be successful in a new policy, that we don't call decentralisation, we're calling it regionalization. This is about people, the people having choice, whether they work for government agencies or whether they work for corporate or small to medium, whether they run their own business. We want people to have a choice about where they're choosing to live and work and raise their family. And so it totally turns that policy on its head and enables a really different way to think about what our nation might look like.

Renata: Yes. When I think about what we're going through in Australia, I often wonder, and I haven't had time to do research on this. I wonder if this is an international trend in other countries like Australia, maybe Canada, you know, countries with big open plan areas that haven't really seen a lot of regionalization in the past. If that's a trend that they're seeing as well? You've been watching this space and where if there is a best practise out there that we can emulate here.

Liz: Yeah. I know I don't, I don't have that information firsthand. I'm sure my colleague and my chief economist Kim would actually have. So perhaps I can come back to you with that answer, but anecdotally, I can speak to it because you only need to look at the way, you know, I've got friends and colleagues who, and myself I've worked out of London. I've worked out of Europe. I mean, they operate very differently. And if you think about global companies, I mean, I could use the example of Expedia group who are in my council.

Liz: So they won't mind me sharing the story. Their head of corporate affairs and brand is based out of Singapore. She rarely goes to an office, that's where she's worked from well before covid, because they work on international timeframes. And so they're constantly having to schedule their lives flexibly so that they can manage meetings globally to ensure that you're getting that global footprint to have the appropriate people in meetings. So, I mean, if you think about, you know, what we're proposing here, it's not like it isn't being done globally. It's just unbundling

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these traditional constructs that we've had about work, and what work looks like. And this notion of presentee-ism has been dominating our employment and our psyche in many respects. And so it's really an opportunity to kind of break that down. And so if you look globally and internationally, I think we'll be pleasantly surprised.

Liz: I mean, I know even from my time working in London, that many of the people that I worked with would be living regionally and they would be commuting in, some of them an hour, hour and a half each way. And they did that happily because they loved that lifestyle. And so, you know, it takes us into another conversation about connectivity. And so previous iterations of this conversation about how do you grow regions, has always been somewhat held back by the fact that we don't have fast rail and that we don't perhaps have the train network that's so, you know, it's so accessible in Europe and other countries, and there's a variety of reasons why we don't have that. And there's probably a good case to think about starting to enhance that transport capacity, but what we're proposing now, doesn't have to be held back by any settings.

Liz: We can do this right now. And that's what's really exciting. We don't need to wait for government to support this. And this is what I'm saying to my council. Yes, we're working with governments and we always do. We're working hand in hand to ensure that there will be ways that government will need to support this, but let's be that kind of first leader and say, we can do this differently. I mean, we're actually working through the council at the moment to develop equal opportunity. I'm sorry, an employer of choice for regional Australia. And I've got this on the table for our next meeting. I see this as a very important lever to put regional in the minds of corporate leaders and in the same way, and you'll appreciate this from our working time at CEDA, where women in leadership and the gender agenda, what we saw in that 10 year period, when we were working at CEDA, his was really formational in my thinking about what we could do with regional.

Liz: And there's many parallels. If you think about, you know, the barriers that women have had around securing flexible enough work, securing the levels of trust that they desire to try to find that balance with their children and their careers. This is no different really offering the regional support is really using many of those internal policy settings that are already there, just underutilised, significantly underutilised. And if you get into these organisations, what we need to understand is where's the blockage, because we know with gender, it often came down to a person's manager. So it might've been very well supported internally and externally at CEO level and executive level. And then as you cascade down through organisations, there were blockages. So this will be no different. So what we need is CEOs around the country, around the world, to step up here and say, there's a different way to run your business. That will have a lot of benefits to your business. And we need to cascade that thinking and make sure that it can be permeated through those organisations and through government agencies.

Renata: Because you're right. And people don't want to have to make this choice between their careers and their lifestyle.

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- Liz: No, and nor should they.
- Renata: Those two can be done and matching if possible. At the beginning of this podcast, it was episode eight. We interviewed Allister Freeman who I had never met before, but he posted on LinkedIn and the post he did went viral and I found it and I'm like, I need to interview this guy. And it was basically relating his experience, having been made redundant from NAB, and how that happened and how he felt and what happened next. And the post was so beautifully written and so positive. And so philosophical. No, it's not a great experience, you know, to have been made redundant, but he had very good things to say about NAB and how they did it in a very positive way. And he had the opportunity with his partner to decide what they wanted to do next. And what they wanted to do next is to move out of Melbourne.
- Renata: So he had the time to look for work regionally and move to North new South Wales. And he found a job with a local employer there. And I'm assuming that, that was excellent for the employer to have somebody with that, you know, banking and finance experience and introduce something fresh and new to their local business. So that's great. But do you think that, is there always an appetite from the local communities to welcome people coming in? I say this because I travelled to regional Victoria, quite a lot to regional, everywhere. Quite a lot. I got anywhere from, you know,
- Liz: Because you're canvassing your dream Renata that's why.
- Renata: It's really funny when you walk into a pub, you know that feeling? You walk into a pub and it's like, you're in a movie, everybody looks at you, right. Who are these people?
- Liz: Aw, Oh, they could be just admiring, you know, your beautiful face and, eclectic outfit. Often it's that, 'Oh, we know they're not local.'
- Renata: We're not locals, we're definitely not locals. And it's lovely, you know, and eventually we chat and we get together and talk, but there's that awkwardness, you know, you're going to be scrutinised and you're not really sure if you're that welcome, you know.
- Liz: Yeah. Oh look it's a good question. I think again, you know, what's exciting about regional Australia is also terrifying and that's the diversity. So you've got tiny, tiny towns, we call Heartland regions and then you've got your beautiful regional cities. And then you've got everything in between. And that experience and that story you've just told will be different regardless of which, you know, depending on which town you're entering or regional city. Look, I mean, of course different communities have their own social fabric. And of course it's no different to starting in a new organisation or moving into a new neighbourhood, moving cities, you know, the experience of trying to find people that you connect with will be no different to moving, you know, in Melbourne, to Mordialloc where you are, and trying to find that tribe that, you know, you feel you have that connection with, I guess, you know. It's what you put in is what you get generally in anything in life.

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- Liz: And so knowing you Renata, there may have been a sideward glance, but by the end of it, they were probably buying you a drink. And, you know, you were talking about when you might visit next time. So it really it's personality driven. I think a lot of these things, I mean, I'm an extrovert like you, and, but my partner is an introvert and the idea of going up and talking to a stranger, which I do regularly, he just stands back and just has the jitters. But you know, that's his personality. And so he's very lucky that I'm happy to be the front woman.
- Renata: Well, no, I am actually the introvert in our relationship. I'm a closeted introvert, you think I'm an extrovert, I'm probably not.
- Liz: So that's quite interesting because of where I've seen you in your work, but that's, that's often common as well.
- Renata: Oh no, when we go out Andre is the one who's a superstar. I just need to sit and watch. Yeah. I just need to watch and laugh.
- Liz: Yeah. Gorgeous.
- Renata: But I think, you know, I think that it's important to talk about that because we romanticise this idea of moving to country towns and it takes a while to get yourself, involved in the community and it can be quite lonely and it's the same with every move, if you're moving countries as well. I've noticed that with your team, you have somebody that is, um, I forget the title, but she is regional and migration as well?
- Liz: Yes.
- Renata: Can you explain that sort of work that you do involving migrants in regional Australia.
- Liz: Yes. Yeah. Look, so the RAI is a think tank and a piece of work that was developed a couple of years ago. So under my predecessor found that through migration and largely secondary migration, a number of small, quite small regional communities, we're able to tap into not only new labour, but to welcome migrants to a community and provide them with really, essentially a whole new life. And this, I guess the way this was framed throughout our lens and our thinking is this is really a powerful demonstration of what a locally led migration strategy can do. And, you know, there's many wonderful examples. Nhill's probably one of the most famous, the Luv-a-duck business there.
- Renata: I was thinking of them! Yeah!
- Liz: And it's probably one of the more famous stories, but ultimately, you know, these regional towns and these are very tiny, tiny regional towns. So when I talk about that diversity, some of these towns have been seeing net outflow of population for a variety of reasons. And so for any business, regardless of what line of, what sector you are in, getting appropriate labour was restricting their ability to grow and to scale up. And so, you know, again, through some entrepreneurial thinking, realised that there's a whole community, migrant community who potentially don't love living in our large cities, perhaps migrated from regional areas of their own countries and the opportunity to raise their family and work in a regional area, ticks a lot of

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boxes. Now it's not a quick process. It really does take very strong local leadership. And the demonstration of Nhill's is just a wonderful example of what's possible that local champion leading that change. And so doing it with a lot of volunteer efforts.

Renata: Well, I'm going to quickly explain that Nhill's a town in regional Victoria and Luv-a-duck is a company in that town that hired migrants to work for them. And it worked really well. And I'm going to find a news article about it and link it in the episode show notes so that you can see how it was done. It's a famous story here in Australia.

Liz: Can link to the narrative. I can give you.

Renata: You know, there is an abattoir here in Victoria that hired over 60 Brazilian butchers at one stage.

Liz: No, I didn't know that, but I'm not surprised. Because you know, we worked with the meat industry quite a lot. And, you know, so we actually launched last year, the steps to settlement success, because there are so many benefits for communities to actually take this opportunity and it benefits both ways, as I said. You've got that the migrants sitting in Melbourne, perhaps not working in areas that they're loving, or maybe finding it difficult to even access work, and being isolated, if they don't have vehicles and depending on where they're living, it's quite expensive. So the opportunity to move out to regions is also an affordable choice for often larger families. But we see a lot of migrant families are large families. And so having that opportunity to be part of a community and the cultural dimension that they bring, I mean, you know, to your previous question about feeling as if it might be hard to connect, the stories that we've showcased throughout migration narratives, and we've got eight of them on our website, if you wanted to draw your listeners to that.

Renata: Okay, we'll do that.

Liz: We, time and time, again, every example you see in the community with warm and open arms to welcome the migrants because they see and understand the benefits of, you know, bringing their population, bringing population back to their region, but diversifying their population, building that sense of cohesion, building a new future, it's different to their history, but it's creating a new way of their town, thinking about themselves, like the way that they've lived in the past is not the way the town functions into the future. So, ensuring that you've got that diversity of culture is creating sense of vitality really, and a great opportunity to learn from one another. And so there's beautiful stories about those experiences. So it's something that my migration director has spent 12 months as part of her role working around the country. Prior to COVID, she was travelling a lot, working with local governments and regional groups to help them build locally led migration strategies and help them actually create the framework to make that possible. And it's something that we're very passionate about at the regions, the Institute. Yeah.

Renata: I'm going to link that. And I'm also going to link the report I saw from your chief economist on the quarter two information about jobs in regional Australia. I thought

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that was really interesting. So I'm going to link that as well. Is there anything else you would like to say to the listeners before we wrap up?

Liz: We've had a wide ranging conversation. I think what I would say about employment, one of the things that we seek to do at the Institute is bust myths. And in the time that I've been with the Institute, which is coming up to two years, nearly two and a half actually. We have been very successful at educating our constituents and politicians and any stakeholder about the opportunities for work in regional Australia. And this was not well known. I think like the same perception that people have that about population leaving the regions, which we've also busted. Work was the same, there was this perception that there are no opportunities in regional Australia. And if you choose to make that move, you will be taking a backward step. So what our work has proven is that, you know, pre COVID environment at any given time, there was somewhere between 40 to 50,000, depending on which quarter you were in, vacancies advertised.

Liz: Now what we know, because we're out there on the ground a lot, is that what you see advertised would only be 50% of what is available. So really at any given time, you could easily say that there would be in the order of at least a hundred thousand job vacancies in regional Australia. And what's exciting about those job vacancies is yes, they're a mixture of low, medium and high skill base, but predominantly they are high skill base. And what I mean by that is there are wonderful salaries that are possibly equal to the salaries that people are enjoying in, you know, metropolitan cities that are available to them. Now, some of the main that you need to move further a field and the like, or have traditionally, but if we're successful in our campaign to move more people to regional Australia, location will become less of a factor and actually our work, and the way we work will be transformed forever more. We hope. So that's a really important thing to understand about the opportunities for regional moving living.

Renata: Thank you for that. That is a Myth Buster for sure. That will be, people will be listening to this and going, okay I had no idea. Here I am trying to find a job in Richmond. I could be looking for work in Aubrey and it would be fine.

Liz: Yeah, absolutely. And I think, you know, the...lost my train of thought. Sorry, Renata. Um, was I going to tell you, Oh, no, the scenarios. So it was late August last year we launched a report called regional population growth. Are we ready? And it did a range of scenarios which talked about the need for Australia to think differently about its population policy and our settlement patterns. And in that report, we actually looked at the difference between salaries, Metro based and regionally based. And it does vary depending on what state you're in. But the greatest differential was no more than 10%. So even if in the worst case scenario, you looked at a 10% salary decrease that is very quickly made up by the cost of living. And the fact that your house will be, you know, if not 50% less, in some cases, you know, even cheaper again.

Liz: And so as part of that, that report, which may also be of interest to your listeners, we also launched what we called the move tool. And this tool is basically looking at

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every local government area in Australia, providing the average income, average house price and average number of years to pay it off. So you can have a lot of fun with this tool. Obviously if you're comparing, you know, metropolitan house prices with the house prices in Castlemaine, you're going to see quite a differential and very quickly, you know, we see it as being one of those tools that people can use when they are starting to think about, where might I like to move to.

Renata: Absolutely. I can't believe we left this for the very end, all the juicy bits. I'm going to download the move tool right away.

Liz: We'll share that with you.

Renata: Thank you Liz, thank you so much. It was great talking to you and seeing your face again.

Liz: I know, my pleasure. So lovely to talk. We need like half a day Renata, because I don't think we got through half of it, darling.

Renata: I don't think so.