

WHEN Allen Blewitt moved from Australia to London, he was surprised at the huge difference between the business environments in the two countries.

Blewitt, chief executive of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, said: “You would think that moving from Australia to the UK would be pretty similar, with the English language, English legal system and so on in common. However, there is a fundamentally different approach here and I needed advice to help me cope.”

In the southern hemisphere decisions were made much more quickly, he said. “In Australia, if you have 80% of the facts you will take the risk and move forward. Here there’s more a tendency to keep talking through the issue to get more than 90% or 100%. I was prepared to push on much faster.

“By moving halfway round the world my old network of support was no longer as valuable because they didn’t understand the new situation. I needed someone I could talk to who understood what was happening in the UK.

“When you take on a chief executive’s role, people think it’s plain sailing. But many chief executives will talk about the loneliness at the top. There’s a lot of isolation because you have to make the tough decisions alone. You need a sounding board, preferably an experienced one, to help with the many challenging decisions facing you.”

Blewitt’s instinct was to find a mentor who could help him manage this change. He got a couple of introductions and spoke to two or three people on the telephone, looking for someone who would not only suit his personality but also provide a confidential sounding board based on his broader business experience.

He said: “It was important to have someone who could understand what was happening in the UK as well as understand me. It had to be someone who was simpatico, someone you could treat as a friend. Picking someone who was a mismatch or with whom you had a prickly relationship wouldn’t help.”

Blewitt said that such a relationship would mean a commitment of at least 12 months. And if your role involved implementing substantial change it would probably have to continue for three years or so.

“The time to curtail it is when the mentor says we are beginning to go

over old ground and you realise you're coping," he said. "A mentoring relationship is enormously helpful because you can focus on all the challenges facing you."

For example, the mentor would help you get your work-life balance right and ask what you are doing to stay fresh and receptive to new ideas.

People in senior management roles were not invulnerable, Blewitt said. "We all need support and help."

But mentoring should not be seen as something just for chief executives. It is perfectly valid further down the tree, particularly if you have a major change process in hand.

Blewitt's choice eventually fell on Merryck & Co, a specialist in mentoring chief executives. With offices in London, New York, Sydney and Paris, Merryck is in its eleventh year and enjoying a boom in the demand for mentoring.

David Carter, the firm's founder, said: "This is our fifth year with growth greater than 40% a year. Finding the right mentors and training them is the greatest restraint on our growth."

The head of Merryck's UK operation is Graham Wallace, former head of Cable & Wireless. Two other Merryck mentors worked for Jack Welch, the legendary former boss of General Electric.

Carter believes a gap is opening in the ranks of senior management as age catches up with them. "As more and more people retire, the problem is accentuated by the inexperience of their successors," he said. "The average chief executive now is 15 years younger than he would have been in the same job 20 years ago. They simply don't have the miles on the clock."

Carter believes these executives with limited experience will suffer. "It will be what you don't know about that will derail you, never what you know about. But a mentor is a great way to reduce the risk. Having a mentor who can look round the corner and see the risk because he has been there before is a great help. If you work with a mentor who has no axe to grind and no hidden agenda, it's much safer."

Every year Merryck holds a private conference for chief executives. Research for this year's event showed 77% of them felt their business model would not stand up to future challenges in the markets they served.

When a group of chief executives was polled about issues that kept them awake at night, they came up with three in particular. The first was that they blamed themselves for a failure to execute strategy they had formulated – somehow the brilliance in the boardroom got lost on the way to the outside world. The second was how to deal in the international village that the world has become. And third was, how do you recruit and hold talent. Get these right and you might not even need a mentor.