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When in Rome . . . Jo Lyle beat the Italians at their own game, designing equipment for top kitchen ware firm, Alessi

Breaking into the Italian job market requires patience and persistence says **John Glover**

Labour of Latin

A foreign journalist visiting a Vicenza-based gold-working firm asked the managing director, innocently, if there were any foreigners working for him.

"Sure there are. We've got people from Trieste, from Padua, even from Calabria," he said without hesitation or any hint of irony. Naturally

though, he explained, nearly all the company's employees had been born and brought up in and around the city, a provincial capital between Verona and Venice.

Italians think of themselves first and foremost as natives of their cities of birth, then of their provinces and only then as Italians — moreover, as Italians from the north, centre or

south. The job market reflects this.

Shirley Henry, internal communications manager for Whirlpool Europe, based in Varese, north of Milan, says: "There's a job-for-life mentality. Generally people move much less frequently than in the UK, so fewer jobs become vacant."

Jo Lyle, aged 32, is a furniture and interior designer, who arrived in

Milan in 1988 with 60 kilos of luggage, a sewing machine, no Italian and no money. "A lot of people want to work here in the big studios — Milan has a worldwide reputation for design and it looks good on your CV," she says.

"It's a very difficult country to set up in — young people live with their families and so it doesn't matter if they don't earn much. That keeps

your earnings down, too."

Lyle stayed with a friend and, for a while, had a lot of fun. Then she got fed up with working for other people for little money and decided to go it alone. "I don't think I realised how difficult it would be. You shouldn't expect anything to happen quickly," she says.

She got lucky when she was chosen to work with Alessi, which makes designer kitchen equipment. "That was my break, it gave me the push I needed. Then I got married which helped me get through the phase when the money wasn't coming in."

Living in Italy is still fun, she says. "I'm thrilled by the idea I can spend the weekend in Rome or Venice or Florence and there are fewer grey skies than in the UK." And the drawback? "It's hard to get to know people unless you have a boyfriend or a wife from the nation. And if you get married you get sucked into this very demanding family thing, they expect a lot of you, especially as a woman."

Lyle says: In the workplace Italian