

Suggested APA style reference:

Furbish, D., & Arthur, N. (2007, July). *International career transitions: Making global connections work*. Based on a program presented at the National Career Development Global Conference, Seattle, WA. Retrieved August 28, 2007, from <http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas07/Furbish.htm>

International Career Transitions: Making Global Connections Work

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Paper based on a program presented at the 2007 National Career Development Global Conference, July 6-8, 2007, Seattle, WA

International Work and Study

Globalisation has created a “world village” and has resulted in important changes in work life (Amundson, 2005). Within the world village, it is increasingly common for people to reside in a country other than their native one in order to work or study. These international career experiences can enhance cross-cultural competencies, develop personal flexibility and adaptability, and broaden occupational experience; valuable competencies for thriving in the world village.

There are increasing opportunities for work and study in other countries. As borders of trade, travel, and migration open between countries, it is predicted that the numbers of international workers will increase. With an aging workforce, many countries are coming to terms with a predicted shortage in skilled labour. This human capital crisis is forcing immigration policy changes to allow more recruitment of temporary and permanent workers from other countries. The labour market of the future is contingent upon diverse sources of international labour from other countries (Heet, 2003). This includes strategies for retaining international students as immigrants who offer a talent pool of skilled labour (Ziguras & Law, 2006).

At the beginning of this century, it was estimated that 1.8 million international students were enrolled in educational institutions around the world (Bohm, Davis, Meares & Pearce, 2002). Projections for long-term growth suggest that the numbers of international students could exceed 7,000,000 by 2025 (Bohm et al.). International education is one of the key ways that students can prepare for working in the global labour market. Students gain exposure to “best

practices” in other countries, greater cultural sensitivity and knowledge, increasing tolerance in their attitudes towards cultural diversity, and greater adaptability to try new things and to be confident about their efforts (Arthur, 2003). The positive outcomes of international education are increasingly being recognized by both students and by employers. International education efforts help to promote a “cosmopolitan world view”, rated as an essential competency for future leaders in business. Other benefits of international education include building connections and networks for future trade and travel between nations, and showcasing the talents of future workers from particular countries. However, the proposed benefits of international education do not happen without adequate attention to the career planning and decision-making needs of international students (Arthur, 2007; Singaravelu, White, & Bringaze, 2005). Students would benefit from interventions that help them translate their international learning experiences into marketable skills for future employment (Arthur, 2007)

These trends show that it is imperative to incorporate international work transitions into the career planning and decision-making making of our future workforce.

Preparing students and workers for learning and working in other countries requires an understanding about the nature of cross-cultural transitions and strategies for cross-cultural effectiveness (Arthur, in press; MacDonald & Arthur, 2005). For example, the literature on international students has paid more attention to the initial stage of cross-cultural transition than helping students to make the transition into the labour market. Similarly, support services for helping international employees manage their international experience are similarly lacking. Employees selected for foreign assignments are frequently chosen for their technical

expertise; however, their capacity for positive cross-cultural adaptation is equally important. Inadequate preparation for the international workplace is costly to both organizations and individuals. In turn, the cross-cultural transition of repatriation poses many challenges for integrating international experience into local settings (MacDonald & Arthur, 2005).

International Experience Benefits

International career experiences can take on many forms and be motivated by diverse goals and expectations. For example, international students may be motivated by their personal goals for academic achievement but family, political, and economic conditions in their home countries may be strongly related to their choice to pursue education in another country (Arthur, 2003). Some workers may seek a fixed-term overseas assignment with his or her employer as a way of gaining broader understanding of international business practices. Others may desire to live and work in another country over a longer period in order to experience another culture and expand personal growth. Yet others may desire to immigrate and establish a “new life” in a country different from the birth country in order to seek economic, professional and personal goals.

Regardless of the reasons that an international experience is chosen, moving to another country is a major transition that should be understood as a holistic life experience. As with other life transitions, there is potential for both positive and negative outcomes.

An international experience is distinctive for each person who undertakes one. For the international experience to be positive, the likelihood for the international experience to result

in desired goals (work or personal) should be considered before the international experience is undertaken. The potential for the international experience to have negative outcomes must also be assessed and strategies devised (as well as possible) to minimize undesirable events. Planning and flexibility emerge as two essential personal qualities for those considering an international transition. These qualities are essential for integrating international experience into career planning and decision-making (MacDonald & Arthur, 2005).

Expanded knowledge of international practices, competency in interacting with other cultures and adventure are typical outcomes expected from an overseas career experience. So also is the development of personal relationships with international colleagues, which may be important in future career advancement. Sometimes there may also be a financial incentive for working overseas since some employers offer premium salaries to employees who take on an international work assignment. Workers employed by an overseas employer may benefit from reduced or no income tax in some countries.

In addition to occupational and financial incentives for an international career experience, there is also the possibility of personal growth. Inkson and Myers (2005) identified increased self-confidence, independence, open-mindedness, resilience, socialability, and time management skills in those who have lived overseas. There are perceived benefits for gaining new perspectives about the world, enhancing a portfolio of professional skills, and learning many new things personally through working in other countries (Arthur, Patton, & Giancarlo, in press).

International Experience Difficulties

Balancing the potential for benefits from an international experience is the potential for unfavourable outcomes. Neault (2005) discusses a number of these. As part of a normal reaction during cross-cultural transition, culture shock manifests in psychological or physiological symptoms of stress (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). We wish to emphasize that culture shock is an inevitable process, even for the best prepared employees. A general rule is that the greater the discrepancy between home and host culture, the more potential there is for culture shock. Although the experience of culture shock can be unsettling and uncomfortable, it is the experience of cultural contrasts that leads to profound cultural learning (Arthur, 2003; Pedersen, 1995). Extreme (or sometimes even subtle) differences from one's own culture can result in an uncomfortable psychological state. Language differences also can lead to frustrations and limitations in communicating both at work and within the community. Physical danger from political instability or terrorism is possible in most any country these days. Living overseas may also be financially risky. Fluctuations in currencies, living costs and ineligibility for social/medical services may severely drain financial resources when living overseas. Complications for family such as children's education and adaptation can also be a concern. Being far away from other family and friends at home limits the assistance that can be provided should illness or other problems arise.

For those who have resided overseas for a fixed period, repatriation may in itself be an issue. There may be additional adjustment issues when returning home. Sometimes living overseas makes it difficult to keep current with developments in one's occupational field. For example,

the domestic and international operations of companies may not be well connected. Therefore, employees who gain international experience may not be keeping up to date with skills and experience that are valued for local employment. Some employers may also be less willing to see the value in international experience and hold onto local experience as the only valid source. These negative views of international experience can create disadvantages when seeking employment opportunities within companies or in new employment settings after returning home. Employees may not be prepared for the “career curves” that are related to perceptions about their international experience (MacDonald & Arthur, 2004; 2005).

Helping Clients Prepare for an International Transition

An international career transition is surely one of the most encompassing transitions a person can make. This sort of transition impacts virtually every realm of life: employment, family, social, and financial. Cross-cultural transition involves a process over time through which individuals experience a shift in personal assumptions about themselves, others, or the world around them (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Transitions, while presenting the opportunity for growth, adventure and challenge, require the “letting go” of what is familiar. As Bridges (1980) noted, transitions are characterised by a potentially difficult process of leaving what is familiar and suffering the confusing space of the neutral zone where previous planning may not fit current needs. However, this time is ideal for engaging in career in life planning to design a vision and strategies for launching forward.

As career counsellors, we can assist our clients who are considering or in the process of making an international career transition. Assisting clients gather accurate and useful

information is essential. While unforeseen events are almost certain during an international career transition, being equipped with information about the country, living conditions, culture, government regulations and every day life will be invaluable for preparing for and coping with the trials of the transition. No amount of information is likely to cover all eventualities, but the more information a person has, the more likely that foreseen and unforeseen aspects of the international transition will be handled in stride rather than result in personal disaster.

To be sure, an international career transition is a major life event. As such, international career transitions can be understood as possessing characteristics of other significant life transitions. When situational factors that may contribute to the difficulty of the transition are identified, counsellors can better assist clients to attend to these factors, potentially lessening the difficulties associated with the transition.

Timing issues comprise one group of variables identified by Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995): Is the transition anticipated?; Is it occurring at the best time in the person's life?; Is there time to absorb the impact of the transition? Another set of variables deal with resources for making the transition: Is there sufficient physical and psychological energy to cope with the transition?; Is there emotional support from family and friends?; Are there adequate material resources during the transition? The attitude of the person undergoing the transition also impacts upon how difficult the transition is likely to be: Is the transition desirable?; Does the person feel in control?; Is the person optimistic about the transition?; Does the person have a positive view of self? Lastly, stress that the person is experiencing in

other life roles and how the person copes with disruptions to routines and relationships influence the ease with which the transition is effected. Career counsellors who explore these variables with clients who are engaged in an international career transition will likely identify potential problem areas. Clients can then strategise in order to minimise the impact of the problem area on their international career experience.

International Career Transition Vignettes

We have written four vignettes to illustrate some of the dilemmas faced by workers during their transitions of working in another country and returning home. Readers are invited to review the vignettes and consider the following questions:

- What are the central issues of cross-cultural transition?
- What could have helped prepare the main characters for their transitions?
- What are the career and life-planning issues that surface in the vignette?
- As a career counselor, what directions might you work on with these individuals?

Vignette One

Rick grew up in a small village in England. After completing an accounting degree at a nearby university, he began work with an international accounting firm. .

The partner-in-charge of Rick's office mentored Rick and recognised his potential to advance into the firm's partnership. However, he advised Rick that the firm was emphasizing business with international clients and that Rick's advancement to the partnership would be fast-tracked if he had international experience.

The firm offered an international work programme, for which Rick applied and was accepted.

With the advice of his mentor, Rick requested a two-year assignment to the United States in a medium sized Southern city.

Before leaving for his U.S. assignment, Rick and his partner, David, made a long term commitment to each other. Therefore, David wanted to accompany Rick in his over sea's adventure. .

Nothing seemed to go right from the time Rick and David left England. David became ill during the long flight to the U.S. Upon landing, the office representative who was to meet them at the airport was not there. Rick hired a car and was driving to the hotel when he had a minor traffic accident. They eventually got to the hotel in a taxi. After an un-restful sleep, Rick and David went out to breakfast only to find that while away from the room, it had been burglarized and many of their possessions had been taken.

When Rick did meet the partner-in-charge of his new office, he received a very negative response when he talked about David. He was told that he was to not bring David to any of the firm's social functions as the community was conservative and an openly homosexual employee would create a 'bad image' for the firm.

What appeared to be a dream international assignment turned into a nightmare. Rick and Davis decided to return to England as soon as they could book a flight.

Rick's manager in England was not understanding. A replacement for Rick had already been hired. Further, Rick had signed an agreement obligating him to a year's work in the U.S.

office. His English office was not willing to allow Rick to re-join the office.

Vignette Two

Dave began working at a small college in the U.S. immediately after completing his Master's degree in counselling. Dave enjoyed working at the college and remained there for 20 years. He continued his formal study in career counselling during this period and earned a doctorate in the field.

Dave and his wife, Joanne, traveled overseas on holidays. They also developed an interest in other cultures and hosted a number of international visitors in their home.

On a holiday trip to New Zealand, they experienced the sort of environment that was compatible with many of their interests. In talking to New Zealanders, Dave and Joanne discovered that career counselling was not a service that was widely available, but that there was great interest in it. Coincidentally, Dave found out that one of the New Zealand universities was going to start a career centre and would be hiring staff. Joanne's enquiries about work in her field, accounting, also generated a number of job leads.

Following their return to the U.S. after their holiday, they decided to follow up by submitting job applications as well as enquiring about obtaining permission to reside in New Zealand. They found out that their professional experience was valued in New Zealand, and both received job offers. They also determined that the combination of their formal qualifications and work experience met the criteria for permanent residence visas from the New Zealand

government.

Presented with the employment opportunities to work in New Zealand and well and immigration status, they decided to make the move to New Zealand. Soon after beginning work at the university's career centre, Dave was asked to establish a qualification for career counsellors. There were no other such programmes offered in New Zealand. The programme was popular and quickly Dave became more involved in academics than in service.

Joanne also found her accounting qualification and experience opened doors to senior positions in New Zealand.

Dave and Joanne moved to New Zealand with the plan to re-evaluate their decision after two year. Two years quickly passed. They enjoyed the career and personal growth opportunities in New Zealand so much that they decided to take out New Zealand citizenship and make their move permanent.

Vignette Three

Nadir was a 27 year old international student from Malaysia who studied in an engineering program. He was in the last year of his program and was making plans to return home. He attended a workshop on preparing for graduation that was sponsored by the counseling office at his university.

Nadir found that he could relate to a lot of the other students. Although he was really excited about returning home to his family and friends, he was also feeling a lot of sadness about

leaving the university and the host country. He and other international students laughed a lot when the counselor asked them to think about what it was like in their first month as an international student and to reflect about some of the challenges they had faced. This seemed so long ago. Nadir remembers how stressful it was for him to get used to the weather, how hard it was to understand the expectations of professors, but he felt a sense of pride about finishing his degree.

During the workshop, the counselor asked participants to make a list of the things they positively anticipated upon returning home. Nadir found himself writing enthusiastically as he anticipated reunions with his friends and family members, eating food from his home country, and spending more time at the beach. Next, the participants were asked to reflect on each of the items and to consider if there might be some tensions or difficulties about returning home. Nadir was initially puzzled by the request but he began to think about some possibilities.

Nadir was feeling a lot of pressure about returning home and about how well his education would transfer to the company that helped to sponsor his education. His family had saved for years to send him abroad and now there would be expectations for him to support his family. He knew that he would also be expected to marry soon and start his own family. This was complicated because he was currently in a relationship with someone and she was not from the same religion as his family. The cloud of excitement soon shifted to some worries that Nadir knew he needed to face.

Vignette Four

Rena was a 45 year old woman who was recruited by an international firm to work in Russia on a project in the oil and gas industry. She perceived this offer to have good timing as she was bored with her job and looking for some new challenges. Although she was feeling anxious about the international assignment, her background skills and sense of flexibility were assets that she knew would make a difference in her new position.

Rena lived in Russia for 2 years and was manager of the project. She found that she enjoyed living in Russia more than she could have imagined. She developed close friendships with a number of expatriates as well as a number of Russian locals who were working in the project. Each week they went out to experience an array of cultural events.

When the project was finished, Rena was offered a position with the domestic operations of the oil and gas company. She was initially relieved at this job offer as she was concerned about what she would do upon returning home. However, this initial sense of relief was soon overshadowed by feelings that she was being stifled. The job had few management responsibilities, she felt hampered by her supervisor in making decisions independently, and the position lacked challenge. She also found that few of her co-workers had any interest in hearing about her international experience or how some of her new ideas could be incorporated into local operations. Rena felt discouraged and started a job search.

The Re-entry Transition

The previous vignettes illustrate some of the potential adjustment issues that emerge from working internationally. However, greater focus has been placed on preparing employees for

international roles than planning for the return home. There is overwhelming evidence that the re-entry transition involves reverse culture shock and many adjustments due to internal and external changes in both individuals and in the home environment.

Re-entry refers to the reacclimation of the individual to the home culture after an extended period of exposure to another culture (Adler, 1981). An international experience does not end with the physical location home; rather it is more of a psychological process that involves preparing for return home, disengaging with the host culture, and integrating into the culture of the home country. Therefore, the re-entry transition needs to be considered within the context of the entire cross-cultural experience (LaBrack, 1993; Martin & Harrell, 1996).

The re-entry transition differs from the initial stage of transition to the host culture in three ways (Martin, 1984). First, most people expect that there will be a period of adjustment when they enter a new culture. However, they may not expect that there will be any adjustments involved in returning home. This leaves many students, employees, and the significant people in their lives unprepared for reverse culture shock (Gaw, 2000). Second, there are varying amounts of change involved between stages of cross-cultural transition (Martin & Harrell, 1996). International students and workers are rapidly immersed into the new culture of the host country and often expect to experience dramatic change. However, they may not be prepared for the amount of change in the home culture, either dramatic changes or, conversely, the lack of change that has occurred during their absence. Third, gaining awareness about change may only occur after international students or workers return home (Adler, 1981). It is only after a period of interacting with other people such as friends, family

members, or people in their workplace that they realize how much they have changed.

There are a number of career-related issues that may surface during the re-entry transition.

Common concerns include a sense of loss around relationships and leaving the school or employment environment; career mobility; transferability of educational, language, or employment competencies; resuming prior relationships or roles; and values conflicts.

Lifestyle changes and personal learning while studying or working abroad can result in new ways of viewing self, others, and the world (Arthur, 2003; Wang, 1997). Career interventions help individuals to gain a better understanding of internal and external changes that impact their cultural identity.

Practical Planning Suggestions for International Career Transitions

Supporting students and workers to integrate their international experience is a key direction in the delivery of career counseling services. Several considerations are offered for career counseling services.

- Values clarification is an important domain of career counseling. The experience of cross-cultural transitions can result in profound personal learning that prompts an examination of values. Exposure to cultural contrasts may lead to a clearer grasp of personal values or lead to a sense of dissonance through which individuals feel conflicted about their values. Career counseling can help individuals to a) identify salient cultural values in home and host cultures, b) explore which values related to career are now most salient, and c) incorporate values into future academic and employment directions (MacDonald & Arthur, 2004). Values clarification helps students to explore their career options, and whether their original plans continue to be the most suitable option or whether new career goals have emerged that require exploration. Working with a values-based approach to career counseling can help individuals to consolidate their sense of cultural identity and help them to choose career paths that are congruent for job satisfaction (Brown, 2002).
- Constructivist approaches that emphasize client narratives are helpful to explore the

personal meanings of living and learning across cultures (Brott, 2005; Peavy, 1997). Career counselors can support students and workers to examine the cultural meanings of their experiences and help them to author possible new interpretations of their stories in light of current career issues. Using constructivist approaches can help both counselors and clients to enter into the role of learners to gain better understanding of cultural influences on career issues and to incorporate culturally relevant perspectives into career counseling interventions (Arthur, 2006).

- Students who are entering the labour market and returning employees need to be able to represent their international experience in practical ways to employers. For example, career interventions can be designed to help clients identify the competencies they have gained through international experience (MacDonald & Arthur, 2004). It is important that clients be supported to translate their international experiences from general terms, e.g., “I have worked internationally”, into concrete examples and specific competencies that are relevant for local employers. Overcoming some barriers to hiring following international employment requires workers to show how their international experience translates to local employment contexts.
- Career practitioners can provide clients with handouts that define and describe competencies that are valued by employers. For example, taxonomies of international employment competencies typically detail three domains: intercultural competencies, technical/professional competencies, and personal competencies (e.g., Wilson, 1998). Literature is also available on competencies for managing cross-cultural transitions that provide clients with anchors for representing their international experience (e.g., Arthur, 2002; Inkson & Myers, 2005).
- Career counselors can provide feedback to clients about the competencies that are represented in descriptions of international experience. During individual interviews or role-plays during career workshops, this process models ways of identifying specific competencies gained from international experience.
- Documentation pertaining to academic and employment experience is recommended to supplement information that is provided to employers in general applications and interviews. Career counselors can introduce the idea of employment portfolios to help clients keep records about their international employment competencies. These can be used to provide evidence to employers about the nature of international work, and what kind of expertise was gained.
- Career counselors need to become familiar with resources for gaining additional international experience in either academic or employment settings. Many students and workers want to continue their international career track and need help to research future opportunities. New ideas about adding international dimensions to career planning may help clients to increase their career options and expand their global

connections.

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