Suggested APA style reference:

Neault, R. A. (2007, July). *The immigrant/expatriate/repatriate experience: International work in a global economy.* Based on a program presented at the National Career Development Global Conference, Seattle, WA. Retrieved August 28, 2007, from http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas07/Neault.htm

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The Immigrant/Expatriate/Repatriate Experience: International Work in a Global Economy

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

In today's global workplace, with the urgent need to address skill shortages on the political agendas of many countries around the world, many people choose to leave their country of origin in search of new opportunities. Immigrants and expatriates face different career and personal challenges than workers who remain in their home countries. In some cases, the challenges for individuals repatriating (coming home) are

surprisingly similar to those encountered by new immigrants.

To provide effective services in an increasingly global economy, career practitioners need to become informed about "global careerists," the specific challenges they may face, and success strategies for managing their international careers. Career practitioners may provide services at any stage of the process – serving new immigrants with settlement issues, supporting international workers through culture shock, or assisting those repatriating with getting recognition for their foreign experience back at home.

This paper is intended to enhance awareness of this cluster of clients with their unique needs. I hope it will serve as a starting place – for personal reflection, conversations with colleagues, and a commitment to continuing professional development to ensure appropriate services are available for workers who choose international careers.

The Context: A Global Economy

We see signs of the global economy everywhere. Seattle, host of the 2007 National Career Development Association (NCDA) conference, is the original home of Starbucks coffee. Today, Starbucks is a multinational brand with retail stores in countries around the world including Australia, New Zealand, Asia, the Middle East, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Europe and the United Kingdom, as well as the United States and Canada. Starbucks is "my" coffee – but that statement is also true for colleagues and friends in Taipei, Dubai, and Surfer's Paradise, Australia. There is even a Starbucks outlet within the walls of the Forbidden City in Beijing!

I drive a Saturn. Although Saturns are American cars, I purchased mine on the West Coast of Canada. I'm writing this paper on my HP Pavilion laptop computer, also purchased in Canada; a visit to the HP worldwide website, however, links me to offices and stores from Serbia to South Africa. In a global economy, our relationships with a business are typically local but the organizational foundations may be anywhere in the world.

Just as a local company may relocate an employee to a branch office across town to facilitate knowledge transfer or to address skill shortages, multinational corporations may choose to relocate employees across national borders. On the other hand, a multinational company may set up a branch office in a new country, but staff it exclusively with "local hires." I toured a Canadian manufacturing facility in Kulim, Malaysia, and discovered that the only non-Malaysian working there was an immigrant from Singapore (the country right next door); although the business was Canadian, there were no Canadian employees or managers onsite.

In our increasingly global economy, work may take many forms. As in the Malaysian example, local people may work for a foreign-owned company but never leave their own community. Technology may support individuals from several countries to collaborate on a project, requiring none of them to leave their local offices (or, in some cases, homes). The focus of this brief paper, however, will be on a specific cluster of global careerists – individuals who relocate internationally for work – immigrants, expatriates, and

repatriates (i.e., those returning home after working abroad).

What is a Global Careerist?

In the global workplace, some workers seek out international experience – perhaps arranging an international posting through a current employer or selecting a geographical region to explore and applying for jobs once they have landed within their country of choice. Still others make the decision to emigrate, leaving the familiar behind to pursue dreams for a better future. Some leave their homes during times of turmoil or persecution, perhaps living as refugees as one step in the resettlement process. Others relocate to a new country as a "trailing spouse," either marrying a partner from another country or relocating with a partner as he or she builds a global career (Harvey, 1998).

Global Career Challenges

To many observers, a global career may seem romantic – involving travelling to exotic locations, living amidst diverse cultures, dining on international cuisine, perhaps communicating in a foreign language. The day-to-day reality, however, may be quite different – travelling in crowded trains, living in uncomfortable accommodations, unable to find familiar foods, or struggling to conduct business through interpreters who may have their own political or economic agendas. Global careerists face a variety of challenges that may not be recognized by employers, colleagues, or career practitioners who have no personal experience of living or working internationally.

Although many global career challenges are surprisingly similar (Neault, 2005), the focus

of this paper will be on the challenges typically encountered by immigrants, expatriates, and repatriates. In the following sections, a few of these challenges will be highlighted. This is not intended as an exhaustive list, but rather to enhance awareness of such challenges in the hope of improving services to this increasingly essential group of workers in our global economy.

Immigrants

One major challenge encountered by immigrants is under-employment. The Canadian Labour and Business Centre (n.d.) has documented the transition challenges faced by immigrants to Canada, noting that it is taking many immigrants longer to fit into the Canadian labour market than it did in 1981, during a period with similar overall levels of unemployment. Lamontagne (2003) used a compelling subtitle to sum up the problem, "Seduction and Abandonment." He highlighted the challenges faced by immigrants in getting their foreign education, credentials, and experience recognized by employers in their new country, and called career practitioners to action in addressing needs for better assessment and recognition of prior learning.

Language is another significant barrier to employment for many immigrants. This can be shocking for immigrants whose language skills may have been rated exemplary in their countries of origin. I have worked with immigrants who could barely introduce themselves in English (and would have been completely unable to communicate their skills in a job interview), yet had been employed as college-level English instructors in the countries they just left. Even for immigrants whose primary working language was

English, differences in regional accents and specific business terminology can create significant language difficulties. Some immigrants, speaking flawless English (according to their own local standards), may struggle to communicate at a basic conversational level in a new location. Accent reduction classes may be as important as English as a foreign language classes in supporting immigrants' access to appropriate jobs.

Immigrants may also encounter discrimination related to their ethnicity, culture, religion, or politics. Employers who hope to address skill shortages by hiring immigrants may need to build cross-cultural competencies within their existing workforce in order to create a welcoming environment for diverse workers.

Networking is another significant barrier to employment for new immigrants (Judd, 2004). It is commonly accepted by career practitioners that most work is found through networking; new immigrants, however, rarely have a solid local network to help in generating job leads. Career practitioners can help immigrants understand the importance of networking and support them as they begin to establish a local professional network.

Expatriates

Expatriates differ from immigrants in that their relocation is generally more temporary (i.e., they retain citizenship in their country of origin, but choose to live and work abroad). In today's global economy, however, the lines may be blurry between expatriates and immigrants. Many people who may appear to be immigrants (i.e., from the perspective of local employers, colleagues, neighbours, or friends), may actually be

expatriates who are maintaining significant attachments to their home countries while expanding their career opportunities by working abroad.

Traditionally, many expatriates lived a privileged life. Many were paid significantly more than local hires; some received generous living allowances and support for annual travel to return “home.” Never intending to stay long term in their host country, many chose to live in an “expat bubble,” neither learning the local language nor establishing relationships with local people.

With an international trend toward local hires, however, many expatriates are facing challenges similar to those encountered by immigrants. They need to establish and maintain a local network to ensure seamless employment in an increasingly project-based economy, especially as they may be ineligible for such supports as Employment Insurance which may have bridged periods of unemployment at home. They are expected to master the local language and culture, especially because more and more local workers may have the competitive advantage of local knowledge and connections, as well as strong English skills acquired while studying abroad. Similar to immigrants, many of my expatriate clients have reported being underemployed. Hired for their Western experience, they are not given challenging opportunities to fully utilize their skills.

Because of the transient nature of their move, expatriates face the additional career challenge of maintaining professional ties in their country of origin. This may include memberships in professional associations, maintaining credentials through continuing

education, and staying in touch with a professional network. Maintaining such ties not only takes time, it costs money. It can be challenging to take courses, purchase trade journals, or pay professional dues in US dollars, for example, from a salary paid in local currency. Although the local salary may be sufficient to live a privileged life abroad, it may not stretch very far when converted to currency in the expatriate's country of origin. This, of course, can also influence the repatriation experience, discussed in the section which follows.

Repatriates

Global careerists who choose to return to their country of origin may be ill-prepared for repatriation challenges (MacDonald & Arthur, 2003; Neault, 2005). Several of my clients have been dismayed at the lack of value placed on their international experiences by potential employers. Their experience is surprisingly similar to that of immigrants struggling for recognition of foreign experience and credentials. Ironically, in Canada, we now have foreign credential recognition for immigrants high on our national policy agenda (HRSDC, 2007), yet many of our own repatriating citizens are not receiving similar support. Perhaps the only advantage that a repatriate has is the legal right to work in his or her home country, without the need of a work permit or visa.

Other challenges faced by repatriates may include lack of current credentials or education. Many Western countries are placing increasing emphasis on standards and qualifications, credentials, and professionalization of careers. Individuals who have been working abroad may find themselves left behind – no longer even qualified for the level

of work they had done prior to departure.

Re-establishing a professional network can also be challenging. Even those professional colleagues who stayed in touch through an expatriate's years abroad, may not feel comfortable speaking to the repatriate's level of qualifications, especially if they haven't formed a clear picture of the day-to-day responsibilities handled in the international workplace. Career practitioners may be able to help repatriates communicate their international experience in language that people at home can fully understand.

Many repatriates are not prepared for the culture shock that they experience upon returning home. Although culture shock is a challenge anticipated by most immigrants and expatriates as they prepare to move abroad, it can catch repatriates off guard. Many of my clients have struggled with adjusting to the weather (Canadian winters are notoriously challenging), food, lifestyle, and even basic domestic chores and driving (especially if returning from a country where the norm was to hire domestic help). Repatriates may also find local biases offensive, particularly if targeted at a culture or group with which they have become quite familiar and which they have grown to appreciate.

Even repatriates returning home to a job within their same organization may face challenges. Recent research highlights the need for repatriation services as a retention strategy in the current highly competitive global economy (Lazarova & Cerdin, in press).

Success Strategies for Global Careers

There are several tools and resources that identify success factors for immigrants and those engaged in international careers (Bridge to your future, 2004; Kruempelmann, 2002; Neault, 2003; Weston, 2007). A general consensus is that successful global careerists have a combination of soft skills (e.g., flexibility, cross-cultural competency, resiliency, humour, and comfort with ambiguity), hard skills (e.g., technical and subject-matter expertise) and job search skills (including knowledge of the local labour market, an established network, and a clear understanding of how to find work in the new community).

Pre-departure preparation can contribute to a global careerist's success, whether immigrating, embarking on a temporary international placement, becoming a trailing spouse, or repatriating. "My Global Career" (Weston, 2007) is a website devoted to those interested or engaged in global careers. Web sites have also been established to address the pre-departure needs of immigrants (e.g., Bridge to your future, 2004). Repatriation support is an emerging field, but is typically limited to supporting individuals (and, where applicable, their partners and families) when returning from an international assignment with the same employer.

Specialist Skills for Career Development Facilitators

Although cross-cultural competencies are increasingly emphasized in training programs for career development facilitators, there is limited training available to equip career practitioners to provide the unique support required by global careerists. The Multicultural Specialist stream in the fully online Career Management Professional

program (Life Strategies, n.d.) offers specific courses (i.e., The Immigrant Experience and International / Global Careers) to bridge this gap. Other courses in this specialty stream provide focussed discussion questions and specific resources to help career management professionals better understand the challenges faced by immigrant, expatriate, or repatriating clients and their families.

Summary

Global careerists (immigrants, expatriates, and repatriates) are serving an increasingly important function in our global economy, facilitating the transfer of essential skills and knowledge across international borders. Unfortunately, the unique career challenges they face are not widely understood by career practitioners, employers, or policy makers. The goal of this paper, and the related presentation at the National Career Development Association conference in July, 2007, is to increase awareness and stimulate discussion about how to best support individuals engaged in international careers. If each career practitioner took at least one relevant course, together we could make a significant difference in supporting the career transitions of this important segment of our population.

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