



Sustaining a Global Life

Global Cosmopolitans are often pigeon-holed by organisations as mobile and adaptable people, standing ready to be parachuted into the next market. But they should push back when they want to go “home” or stay put for a while and companies should listen.

Luisa, a former South American student of mine got yet another international assignment. This time, her company wanted to send her from the head office in the UK to Australia. She had been pegged as someone who could move anywhere. She’d done it before, many times. But this time was different; she wanted to stay in one place and settle for a while. Right after the birth of her second child, HR offered her a promotion in Australia. She tried to explain that she had gained many skills that she could use as a result of her mobility in the head office, but she felt tagged as easily mobile. They had given her a promotion and set up the new position, but this time, she didn’t bite. She used this as an opportunity to decide what would be best for her. She changed companies.

Global Cosmopolitans are mobile and adaptable and their companies take advantage of that fact. Those who have moved before, and done so seamlessly, are immediately arrowed when the next international assignment comes along. But what happens when the executive has run out of enthusiasm for another stint overseas and wants to stay put, start a family or settle with the family they’ve already brought around the world? What happens if they decide that they want to go to the place that they call home?

The greater complexity of global living requires even more sophisticated soul searching, decision making and creative solutions. But Global Cosmopolitans have no single script to follow. Many have picked up a spouse along the way, sometimes another Global Cosmopolitan who also has a diversity of experiences and needs. When they decide to settle together or move together, they often feel overwhelmed by the number of variables to consider. If one gets an opportunity, the other has to make sacrifices to their careers. I often see couples taking turns to make the decisions on major moves to enable both of them to pursue their career goals.

Those on the move might want to understand the implications of a new professional opportunity or the personal consequences of following a life partner. Those who are questioning their choice to live globally might feel the need to have a home base for their children or to be close to ageing parents. These choices also depend on economic and political realities. Some companies make it harder to go home. Some countries do, too.

Global Cosmopolitans are changing

As I noted in [a previous post](#), Global Cosmopolitans are excellent at learning and using new ways of

thinking. They see change as normal and rely on creative thinking. They're also becoming more comfortable asking their companies for help. Global Cosmopolitans often feel that if they don't have the opportunities to use what they've learned, they will not hesitate to leave an organisation for one that recognises their unique skill set. Companies tend to see Global Cosmopolitans one way, but they see themselves very differently.

The weight of continuously making major decisions and taking responsibility for moving themselves and family members around can also add to the internal struggle Global Cosmopolitans live with. Pushing back on their employer's demands can be beneficial and they should seek greater dialogue with their managers. But as I mentioned in [this post](#), despite their adaptive capacity and ability to learn, many global cosmopolitans are unable to define their identities or what they've learned. But the benefits are two-fold:

1. If they become better able to articulate their experiences and the skills that they have developed, negotiating with bosses about moving back to their home country or turning down an assignment, they can help their superiors understand the value of their global experience and position themselves for roles favourable to their preferences.

2. If companies help Global Cosmopolitans to articulate their stories, they can better understand the global minds in their midst and potentially unearth their potential for global roles.

As I discussed at the [INSEAD Sustainability Executive Roundtable](#) in June, there are a few ways Global Cosmopolitans can deal with the complexity of their lives and make decisions more comfortably. One is taking care to manage the relational aspects of a global life. Knowing that moves can involve surprises, losses, gains and many reactions that are impossible to anticipate, Global Cosmopolitan couples understand the importance of making decisions together. For example, finding new solutions for including extended family can be crucial to the long term success of a move, especially when children come along. Global Cosmopolitans should also make an effort to know themselves and what kind of help they might need and what kind of knowledge they can offer to easing the transition. Discussing job opportunities and decisions with close friends or professional coaches can help them grasp what the change might mean for them and those around them. In some cases, speaking to someone who is going to slow them down and pinpoint the simple answer is a good approach. Organisations can make a difference in facilitating the move, but, one often has to ask.

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In my next post, I will expand on this with a framework I have developed in my many years of working with Global Cosmopolitans for how to think about and approach change.

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