



## What Diaspora Executives Learned When They Returned Home

**Adjusting to a new culture isn't easy, but for many, coming home is even harder.**

The tide of brain drain from developing to developed nations has turned as a growing number of highly skilled Indians, Chinese, Brazilians, Nigerians, etc. flock back to their countries after a long time away. They left, either as children with their émigré parents, or for study and early career opportunities. They return, in search of identity, of bigger opportunities, to look after ageing parents, to seek their roots, or a combination of these. The countries they leave are certainly the losers in this transaction as these are typically the very best and brightest.

The following real-life stories contain wisdom and advice for those contemplating the journey, and for anyone who is considering employing a “re-pat”.

### Putting the puzzle together

Marta, a native Peruvian who is now the Founder and CEO of **Wasi Organics**, left her home country for study in Spain after high school. Later, she took increasingly senior marketing roles at major companies across Europe and the USA. Along the way, she completed an MBA at INSEAD, which further broadened her already very global outlook.

The trigger for Marta's return to Peru was an invitation from a headhunter in London to take a CEO position. Intrigued that she was now perceived as a potential CEO, she started to think hard about

what she really wanted to do. Swiftly, she concluded that she wanted her own business and to give back in some way to Peru. This was Marta's twentieth year in Europe and at that point, eight years ago, she returned home.

### Four Key Challenges for Re-pats

- 1. Underestimating the Need to Readjust** Don't expect a swift and smooth reintegration. You may initially feel like a stranger in a strange land.
- 2. Experiencing Frustrations in Daily Life** Depending on where you're from, things can take longer than you expect and cost more than you budget for.
- 3. Getting a Social Life** It will be harder to feel fully aligned with family and old friends, who may not relate to your life experiences overseas.
- 4. Gaining Professional Acceptance** The knowledge, skills and style you have acquired overseas won't automatically apply back home.

She had expected the transition to be difficult, but in fact she was “completely lost”. For three years she decided to go with the flow and not attempt big professional activities, as the adjustment process was “just too much”. Her three biggest challenges? “Getting a satisfying job” (never happened),

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“Engaging the kids and settling them” (achieved, but easier for one than the other) and “getting a social life” (not as easy as expected). At last, the final puzzle piece fell into place: she created her own “not just for profit” company. Her “giving back” consists of working with small farmers to create excellent organic food products, taking advantage of Peru’s extraordinary biodiversity and environmental purity.

Despite Marta’s 20 years of experience, she had to fine-tune her skills to “unimaginable” levels and, coming from abroad, it was a big stretch culturally. She hints at the bureaucracy and highlights the difficulty of dealing with people who say yes but don’t follow through. Another hindrance has been her direct, no-nonsense and demanding personality—which served her well in prior roles. She believes her company could not have survived this long had she not had a much “softer” business partner. And Marta has found ways to soften her own approach without compromising her grit and resilience.

Marta is open to future social entrepreneur opportunities and ultimately plans to split her time between Peru and Europe. She anticipates that her children will study, and eventually settle, in Europe.

Her advice to those contemplating a return to Peru is to practice yoga and meditation! She emphasises that trying to change everything does not work. There is a huge grey area between imposing one’s will and giving up completely, she asserts.

### “Yellow outside, white inside”

#### Seven Tips for Those Considering Coming Home

**1. Answer the Why Question** Know what your reason is for returning. Ask yourself “How motivated am I?”, “What is my vision?”, “Am I flexible enough to adapt?”

**2. Have a Plan But Keep an Open Mind** You need a plan with realistic targets, but be prepared to adjust your goals or your timing.

**3. Be Patient and Stay Optimistic** Anticipate numerous frustrations and emotional highs and lows. Exercise your patience muscle, persevere and stay optimistic.

**4. Fine-Tune your Skills** Be prepared for a cultural stretch. Adapt your style to gain acceptance while keeping your competitive edge.

**5. Seek Support** Reconnecting with past contacts and calling upon new friends or colleagues can help you navigate the local culture.

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**6. Actively Network** Network with other returning business people who can give you valuable advice.

**7. Take it Easy and Enjoy** You can’t change everything, so maintain a balance between persistence and letting go. Enjoy the best things that your new context brings.

Ferdinand is of Filipino ethnicity but was actually born and raised in the US, his parents having immigrated during the 1950’s. They refused to teach him Tagalog, due to fears of racism and discrimination.

As he advanced into more senior roles in training and offshoring within large corporations, he became known as the “Philippines expert”, as his familiarity with the culture was high—but he is nevertheless, despite appearances, a foreigner.

He has now been in the country for several years, building an ambitious company, **Doctourz**, which aims to offer greater choice in medical services. The main struggle comes from the fact that Ferdi receives from his staff neither the disproportionate “on a pedestal” respect afforded to white expats nor full acceptance as a fellow countryman. He solves this through sheer perseverance, and surrounding himself with a small but faithful “tribe” of like-minded re-pats and others. They jovially refer to themselves as “bananas” (yellow on the outside, but white on the inside!).

Does he see a future in the Philippines? Next year he is marrying his Filipino sweetheart, and this may attach him further to the country. He is also aware that most Filipinos (and he seems to count himself among them) have a soft spot for their homeland, which leads many to return in their later years, even after decades away. With his own company growing, his struggle is diminishing, and the fruits of his labour are ripening. This looks like a successful integration, though it has been neither quick nor simple.

#### Back to the future

Ike, a serial entrepreneur and seller of highly successful businesses, was born in Nigeria into a diplomatic family. He spent his nomadic childhood building his very first companies – selling popcorn to his friends at movie nights in Zimbabwe, and cold drinks to his neighbours in Nigeria. This childhood prepared him for a lifestyle of frequent travel and entrepreneurship.

Ike states repeatedly that he believes he was dealt “an incredibly lucky set of cards in life”, with a Silicon Valley education, an engineering qualification and a taste for business. This was the magical combination for success in a series of start-up

companies. When quizzed on what drove him to create, Ike said that “if you have been put alone on a plane from Harare to London, aged nine, and had to get yourself from Heathrow into central London, and then onto a train to South Devon, finally hailing a taxi to a new boarding school, you can probably find the courage to start your own new company!”

It was about the time that Ike and his wife were expecting their second child that they started to contemplate a return to Nigeria. They saw the children of fellow expats growing up with a confused sense of identity and did not wish this for their family.

Though his first attempt to return was cut short at the last moment by the financial crisis, Ike made it back to Nigeria and for the past two years has been working with mobile banking company **eTranzact**.

Ike feels confident he has chosen to work in a promising sector, and is far from ready for retirement. He never once mentioned the inconveniences of life in Nigeria vs. the U.S., but described in-depth his plans for developing new talents and businesses in his home country.

Asked what advice he would give to people returning, he suggests that they “find out why”, taking an unsparing look inward and discounting rosy childhood memories, which tend to be exaggerated. If they’re still inclined to return, Ike strongly encourages them to take the leap. While he has not planned beyond the time when his children would go to university, one senses that he really is happy in his home country.

### **Use what you’ve learned**

Recognising the need to change is a linchpin of good leadership. Almost all the re-pats we encountered had experienced and embraced change when they were very young. So it might be reasonable to assume that the inner strength and adaptability of these international adventurers aided their transition back to working life in their native land.

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