
The Hidden Skills of the Well-Travelled



By Linda Brimm , INSEAD Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour

The strength and skills developed by a global cosmopolitan lifestyle can, if identified and used correctly, provide a significant competitive advantage in any marketplace. Employers should seek to unearth them.

Meena comes from a family in Kathmandu that could never have imagined sending her to university to study engineering on the other side of the world. But she was determined to study the subject in a foreign land and she did. After earning her degree at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the U.S., she wanted to work for a better world, a dream she has made reality with her job at the World Bank. The uncertainties and complexities of her moves have not been easy. They have meant managing relationships from afar, especially with her family back home, getting work and travel documents and making sure she has enough money to pay off her loans.

Throughout her journey, she often felt alone, because no one else could understand the challenges of her life. But as a result, Meena has learned to manage complex problems. She has had to attack each personal decision with a perspective on the different, often conflicting aspects of her life. She

now sees how the lessons from these experiences allow her to deal with complex problem-solving issues at work.

Studying the phenomenon of Global Cosmopolitans, I have identified a set of five important characteristics that frequently develop as a result of the complexity of a Global Cosmopolitan lifestyle.

1. Global Cosmopolitans see change as normal
2. As outsiders to fixed cultural rules, they rely on creative thinking
3. They reinvent themselves and experiment with new identities
4. They are expert at the subtle and emotional aspects of transition
5. They easily learn and use new ways of thinking

Global Cosmopolitans want the opportunities to use their capabilities and knowledge to create meaningful careers while contributing to global organisations. However, they often end up leaving their roles because their cookie-cutter corporate jobs leave them feeling cut off from their deeper dreams and talents.

Their managers must realise that meaningful and effective dialogue is crucial to understand what motivates a Global Cosmopolitan and what potential hidden skills they have that can contribute to the organisation.

Their CVs don't tell the whole story

In my [previous post](#), I gave a few pointers to help Global Cosmopolitans tell their story. In this one, I share a couple of suggestions on unearthing the potential of Global Cosmopolitans.

Understanding the phenomena of Global Cosmopolitans is a first step in knowing how to help them articulate what they have gained from their personal experience and what they can develop and bring to an organisation.

It is a good idea to start creating the right environment with conversations.. The process of examining identity and even investigating possibilities for Global Cosmopolitans is sensitive. So it's important to start by laying your cards on the table. Take a few minutes in the beginning to explain the purpose of getting to know each other and let them pull the outline of their story together. This is an opportunity to see how they tell it and to check assumptions that you might have. A person's passport may say very little

about them. This sends an important message that you are ready to listen and understand.

Ki's experience is not unusual. After years of living and studying abroad, Ki decided to take a job in finance in a multinational company and return to Korea. While he was very successful, he knew that he was not using his potential. He wanted to use the skills he had gleaned from his living globally and get experience in sales and marketing. After spending a couple of years living at home, he knew that he still wanted some international work experience and he believed that he would be better placed for a senior leadership position in his company after experience in sales and marketing. He took the time to frame the strengths that he had and could develop that were not on his CV. He also found a key mentor in HR that helped him get the experience he wanted in sales and marketing in an emerging market.

Global Cosmopolitans do not readily communicate the breadth of their experiences. Their capacity to adapt to change and complexity comes naturally to them and they fail to recognise it as a unique skill. Sometimes they have done such a seamless job of adapting that it is hard to see their potential for bringing other skills to their work. The best way to overcome this is to get to know the individual and help them articulate what it is about their inner journey that is relevant.

There are also external resources that companies can tap into to assist Global Cosmopolitans in their process of self-awareness and communication. Coaches can assist with challenges at work or personal transitions. This assistance can be combined with 360 degree feedback to help people get a better perspective of how they are perceived.

Another area where Global Cosmopolitans often need help is with their families. "When are you coming home?" is a question they commonly hear from friends or relatives who may themselves be spread in different places. But this innocent question can be loaded with hidden meaning when spoken by family or friends. It can cause Global Cosmopolitans pain, guilt or resentment. Simple decisions about where to spend vacations can also become taxing for them.

The masters of complexity

Opening the door to let them tell their stories is the first step to unearthing the complexity and flexibility of Global Cosmopolitans. While it is ultimately

the responsibility of Global Cosmopolitans to communicate their interests and abilities, it is in the interests of businesses to understand the resources at their fingertips. Is this person a good fit for our global team? Does this person have the know-how and skills to build bridges between cultures? Does this person have the ability to manage complexity? Will this be the right time to send this person to a new culture? These are just some of the questions that managers in global organisations should be considering every day.

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