
Starting Your Career Far from Home



By Antoine Tirard , (INSEAD MBA '97D), Founder, NexTalent and Claire Harbour , (INSEAD MBA '92J), Founder, Culture Pearl

Young people seeking adventure, career enrichment and personal fulfilment should consider an overseas stint.

At a time when there is increasing fear of “others” and “difference” – evidenced by Brexit and the success of Donald Trump – we wanted to take a closer look at the phenomenon of globalised talent. Firstly, what makes some leave the comforts of home, and secondly, how does that decision affect their career evolution over time? What kinds of permanent changes come about? Does the wanderlust endure?

We interviewed four successful professionals, each at a different stage of his or her career. Their diverse life stories show that overseas experience provides irreplaceable career and personal enrichment that, contrary to xenophobic political rhetoric, ultimately works to everyone’s benefit.

She's Leaving Home

Lily's move to the U.K. just before finishing high school in China was not her own choice, though her family situation no doubt predisposed her to this kind of development. Her father had been an expatriate manager of a Chinese multinational since she was a young girl, so she had frequently visited him in France and the U.K. with her mother. Her parents directed that she complete her secondary education at Oxford, to spare her the terrors of the notorious Chinese university entrance exams.

Lily's move to Oxford went smoothly, and she describes the two years she spent living with a host family as the happiest in her life. Moving on to the prestigious London School of Economics, Lily nonetheless didn't envision staying in the U.K. beyond her education years. But she started to realise how privileged and protected she had been all her life. She chose to seek a job on her own merits, rather than using her parents' network, as she always had previously.

8 Tips for First Time Expats

1. Start early - travel, explore the wider world, look for internships, summer jobs abroad

2. Study internationally - find a university with exchange programs, take international courses

3. Learn the language - as much as you can, before, during and after your stay

4. Be open - challenge your assumptions, go beyond your comfort zone, take risk

5. Immerse yourself in the culture - get out and socialise, make local friends, get used to “the local way”

6. Navigate the emotional rollercoaster - most expats go through these stages (honeymoon, culture shock, adaptation...)

7. Seek support - ask your company for a cross-cultural programme, find a buddy, mentor or coach

Having set herself the ambitious goal of obtaining a place on the graduate scheme at a Big Four audit firm, Lily joined KPMG last year. Only on entering the firm did she realise she had no real British friends. She started “learning about beer and rugby and learning about British music”. As she observed, “when there is little in common, it is up to me to do the learning and bridge the gap”. As for watching football: “it is another language to learn!”

Lily intends to stay in the U.K. at least long enough to obtain a full residency permit, and, of course, to complete her audit training. She has a flat and a mortgage, and she feels happily settled. She is grateful to have bigger

horizons than her Chinese peers, many of whom are still struggling to find a rewarding job and a place of their own. However, she knows there will be expectations of her, as only child, once her parents start to age.

When asked if her values changed, Lily explains she has developed a more long-term point of view and an openness to others she didn't have before, adding "this gives much more meaning to my existence". She advises Chinese students to get out and socialise, with as many different people as possible – "to get uncomfortable, and extend their comfort zone!"

1,000 Miles Away

Frenchman Romain has already adapted to more than five cultures and languages in just under 30 years of life. He grew up in a fortunate environment, in which his family perceived travel and exploration as important and had the means to live out these values. He was educated bilingually in the international section of the lycée near his home in Toulouse, and his vacation jobs included managing a resort in Greece for a local travel company. So, it was hardly a surprise that he chose to take a semester during his business studies in Paris, to experience campus life in China.

He aimed to have a career in Asia, at whatever cost. He had already gone to Singapore to start exploring opportunities, when a family link helped him to make contact with the founder of a successful French conference management company. This introduction led to an initial hire as a project manager for a new event in Hong Kong, but with a view to him spearheading an Asian business for the company.

Romain has now been in Singapore for almost three years, built a successful business, and is even discussing a financial stake in the company. Failing that, he will look for other challenges, in alternative faraway places. He is also actively exploring the possibility of opening his own company.

When Romain is quizzed on where "home" is, he is firm about the fact that Toulouse is his "chez lui". He loves his life in Singapore, but the day we interviewed him, he was in Toulouse to buy an apartment. He says that when he lands in Singapore, he knows he is there to "go to the office". In fact, he explains that it feels like going back to boarding school. Not an unhappy boarding school, he hastens to add, but nevertheless a feeling of being "away from home".

Another important element is the fact that he does not have a serious girlfriend. So, he is free to jump on a plane at the drop of a hat. He recognises that this might well change if and when he finds someone with whom to settle down. He would welcome that, but also seems happy to pursue his freedom and mobility as long as they last.

Some of Romain's siblings also live in other countries. Based on the authors' own experience, the travel "gene" seems often to be passed down from one generation to another, but not in all cases, as we discover next.

Homeward Bound

Gabriel is about Romain's age. His parents had a taste for travel, but rarely took their children outside the bounds of Europe. However, Gabriel's father pushed him to take Chinese lessons when he started engineering school. He obeyed, somewhat unenthusiastically, but nevertheless, this opened his eyes to other opportunities.

When a friend of a friend mentioned an internship in a Peugeot Citroën joint venture in China, he sent his CV, realising that his study of Chinese, while not a job requirement, just might convince the potential employer. At this point, he had no specific agenda, but was attracted by doing "something different".

Gabriel's transition to working life in Wuhan was bumpy. He found it deeply depressing not to be able to communicate in a language he thought he'd mastered. He found himself working out of a dark, unheated basement, with little support. However, colleagues were helpful, and he began to settle in and manage. He admits that he went to China with certain prejudices, and that he was even somewhat scared. But he realised his fears were unfounded, and that he could have an amazingly rich life there. He opened up, made good friends, and got used to "the Chinese way".

After the internship, Gabriel returned to France to complete his studies. He soon realised that he had China "on his mind" and focused all his energies on getting another job there. Using his contacts, he obtained another contract and returned to Wuhan, this time working on the French side of the joint venture, where he should have felt much more comfortable.

After his first visit home over Christmas, however, Gabriel began to feel homesick. He had learned to tolerate some aspects of life in China, but never

developed a liking for them. After the contracted 18-month stint, he was offered an extension but decided to return home.

Unfortunately, as Gabriel searched for new challenges back home in France, he did not perceive that his foreign experience was valued. In the end, Gabriel took a “bridging” job – a compromise, but one that allowed him to subsequently find a great position as an IT engineer at Capgemini.

While Gabriel is happy to be back home, he does not rule out going abroad again. He misses the buzz of developing economies and challenging cultural circumstances, so it may not be long before his next jaunt overseas.

10 Attributes You Will Develop (and Make You More Attractive to Employers)

- 1. Agility (intellectual, cultural, social and emotional)**
- 2. Comfort with ambiguity**
- 3. Confidence**
- 4. Cultural sensitivity**
- 5. Curiosity and openness**
- 6. Global mind-set**
- 7. Independence, self-reliance**
- 8. Resilience**
- 9. Self-awareness**
- 10. Willingness to take risks**

Wherever I Lay My Hat (That's My Home)

Richard, a 55-year-old C-suite executive, is without any doubt a poster-boy expat, who has not looked back.

He grew up in small-town New Zealand, and nothing particularly predisposed him to an international career. His family expectations were that he get a good education and seek out a sound career path. But Richard knew early on that he wanted to explore the wider world. It was perhaps this desire to “get out” that drew him towards French in high school. He proved to be gifted in the language, which would later become critical to his success. At university, Richard studied engineering, in the hope that it would take him “out to where the action is”. During his penultimate year, he landed an internship with oil services company Schlumberger in Borneo, and he was, as he says, “hooked”.

Schlumberger offered him a job upon graduation, but then recession hit, and he was left in limbo for a year. However, during that time he received an invitation to start work in Singapore, and spent the next few years on and off oil rigs, mostly in Indonesia. This life of travel, engaging work and constant adaptation really motivated Richard, until he was assigned to Australia, where he felt as if he had been sent back home. The stagnation of this situation started him looking for alternatives, and he ended up working at a start-up company in New Zealand. Unexpectedly, this led to him being appointed General Manager of the company in less than a year, and his life became a whirlwind of crazy energy and chaos.

He learned a lot, but there was still, according to him, a piece of the puzzle missing. Richard wanted a more predictable, stable life, but overseas and with more responsibility. Failure to be taken seriously for corporate general management roles incited him to attend INSEAD’s MBA programme in Fontainebleau. Afterwards, he took on a general management role with U.S. oil equipment company FMC Technologies, acting as a bridge between the U.S. and French cultures. He distinguished himself with his skill at managing intercultural teams.

For the past twenty years, Richard’s career has continued to develop within FMC, with postings in Germany, and then again in France, where Richard and his American wife have a beautiful chateau, and feel at home. He has spent in much of the past ten years at FMC’s Houston headquarters. Throughout, he and his wife have maintained allegiance to their native countries, cultures and languages. On “retirement”, which Richard hopes will involve board and community work, they will split their time between New Zealand, the U.S. and France.

Richard is quick to credit his success to a willingness to go anywhere and do anything, to get far beyond his comfort zone. His advice to those contemplating a path similar to his is to take risks young: “if it does not work out, you have the time and space to recover.”

He fears that the business world lacks leaders who can adapt frequently to new and uncomfortable situations. Young people need more experience leading others, and this is exactly the kind of experience that they can get by doing the sort of work Richard did while still in his study and early corporate years.

Get “Far away” ASAP

We see that the more exposure a young person has to travel, difference, risk and challenge, the more likely he or she is to seek more adventure in his or her professional life. Expatriation is one of the simplest ways to acquire all of these and more, and our subjects took to it with varying degrees of motivation and success.

We believe that the advice given by our subjects is valid. Those seeking not just career success, but also a great, engaging and satisfying life, should seriously consider getting “far away” early on in their careers.

Companies would do well to understand the value of what can be achieved while in another country and culture, and to encourage more risk taking for their high-potential talent.

***Antoine Tirard** is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH. **Claire Lyell** is the founder of Culture Pearl and an expert in written communication across borders and languages.*

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About the author(s)

Antoine Tirard is an international talent management consultant, trainer and coach to large global organisations.

Claire Harbour is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption.