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# Composing a Life of Complex Change



By Linda Brimm , INSEAD

**Firms can benefit greatly from helping experienced global professionals transition to headquarters and a geographically settled life.**

Millions of people are now living truly global lives. These are the people I have labeled “Global Cosmopolitans”. And they form one of the fastest growing clubs in the world. Global Cosmopolitans are the rapidly expanding population of highly educated, multilingual people who have lived, worked and studied for extensive periods in different cultures.

**Evolving your narrative: When Global Cosmopolitans want to return to HQ**

Their special characteristics are the subject of my ongoing research project, including the books [\*Global Cosmopolitans: The Creative Edge of Difference\*](#) and [\*The Global Cosmopolitan Mindset\*](#). Global Cosmopolitans often describe life as a mosaic that becomes a part of who you are. They are authors of their stories, creating a personal narrative that resonates with who they are, who they want to be and the changes taking place in their

identity, as well as in their personal and professional lives over time. Priorities shift and with those shifts, new configurations start to become obvious and possible. While they may choose to reside in one country for a while, they maintain a global perspective and can contribute to solving many of the challenges that come with leading change in global organisations.

### **Transitioning to top leadership**

An exemplary case is that of Isabella, a Spanish national who worked in several countries before finally arriving at her dream destination at corporate headquarters in England. So, when she was asked to change countries once again, she had to evaluate her options. Highly ambitious, she wanted to work at headquarters, which would allow her to be a visible member of the senior leadership team. After many years of loyal, successful service around the world, Isabella felt she had earned a seat at the big table. Moreover, she and her English husband were ready to settle down in the UK. He had already found an excellent position in London; they had purchased a home and found suitable schools for the children.

Isabella told her boss and HR that she wanted to stay put and join the leadership team. She carefully described how she had matured as a global leader and felt ready to take on increased responsibility at this stage of her career.

Within months, HR started to float leadership opportunities for her in other countries. Isabella felt pigeonholed as a flexible, international executive whose leadership potential was tied to her global mobility. While this may have been true of her in the past, she now saw herself as a leader whose “tour of duty” had already given her the skills to head up a global team at headquarters. When higher-ups suggested Australia as an excellent career move, she realised that it was time for a change and took her talents elsewhere.

### **Evolving personal and professional goals**

I have found in my research that by the time they reach Isabella’s level of experience, Global Cosmopolitans have generally developed the confidence, knowledge and skillset to become global leaders. In addition to experience, knowledge and skills, they have a global cosmopolitan mindset that enables them, for example, to evaluate challenges through both a global and a local lens – an essential quality for companies in this confounding moment of

global business and rising nationalism.

The complexities of living a global life affect how people like Isabella view their identities and what it takes to create a meaningful life. They do not measure career accomplishment solely in promotions and salary increases, but also in the ability to continue learning and growing. Accordingly, they view their working life as an opportunity to use what they have learned and show who they have become on their growth journey. Their concept of home is more nuanced than most. It may be more of an abstract notion than a concrete place, or there may be several places that, for them, evoke a feeling of being at home.

If creating a coherent career narrative can be difficult for professionals whose lives are local, you can imagine how challenging it is for Global Cosmopolitans to do so. Because every fresh adventure brings the chance for transformation, their stories are constantly evolving – more like a novel than a short story. Taking stock of how far they have come, and making it clear to others, is a perpetual challenge.

Isabella's case involved one of the biggest transitions Global Cosmopolitans can go through. After building a solid career across borders, Isabella felt it was time to put down roots. Armed with her global cosmopolitan mindset and skillset, she needed her employer to support her creating a home in the UK, embrace her special skills and explore appropriate leadership positions at headquarters. The regrettable split that followed could have been avoided if the company had been committed to listening, understanding and problem solving together with Isabella. They could have come up with a collective answer to the question, "What now?"

## **A three-part framework**

The transition from global professional to global veteran can be a bumpy one. Learning to communicate your experiences and channel them into new viewpoints can make it much smoother. My work with Global Cosmopolitans has contributed to a three-part framework that can be used as a guidepost for those in Isabella's shoes.

### **1. Reframe the story you have been telling**

To prepare for discussions with her organisation, Isabella reread the story she had written about herself ten years earlier. This was an opportunity to

look at how she had evolved and how her priorities had shifted.

Whenever Global Cosmopolitans are at a professional or personal crossroads, I recommend that they collect the strands of what they have learned – including the intangible lessons that could never appear on a CV – and create an undated narrative. In Isabella’s case, she thought through how she could contribute as a leader in the organisation. She knew that she had to make the invisible skills she had learned visible to the people in the head office. She also needed to be articulate about how her needs and values were changing as a result of this latest life-phase. In retrospect, she realised she could have been more articulate about her desire for leadership responsibility and the depth of her commitment to working out of the headquarters at this time in her life. If you are in Isabella’s position, this will help you clarify both to yourself and to others the changes that have occurred.

## **2. Reflect your skills in a different light**

Once you have updated your narrative, create a dialogue with the appropriate people around your career goals and possible career opportunities, as well as the skills you have developed from composing a global life and through professional experience. Show how you can contribute to your organisation.

You may have learned another language (or several languages) while abroad , but it’s your adaptive capacity that will help you pivot to top leadership. Adaptive capacity may consist of knowing what you do not know and how to find answers; managing complex change and decision making; forging collaboration between disparate stakeholders; and risk taking. You may not even know you have garnered those skills, so it may be necessary to perform a thorough self-inventory. Seek opportunities to display your skillset, e.g. by creating consensus within a multicultural team.

## **3. Use your kaleidoscope**

One of the most useful elements of a global life is a kaleidoscopic perspective on the world. Instead of a fixed vision of how life should be, Global Cosmopolitans are able to adjust their ideas and expectations. When they face new challenges, they simply turn the kaleidoscope and perceive, within what some might call adversity, the opportunity to form new solutions and patterns of life. Along with this comes confidence in one’s inner

strengths and the creativity to fill in any gaps that might appear as life's wheel turns.

Global Cosmopolitans can encourage employers to share their kaleidoscopic vision. They can approach their companies in a spirit of experimentation and engage them in a collaborative process of finding a new way forward. Empathy can be a great tool, too. Try to look at issues as your company would and address the concerns you would have in their position. Bridging cultural differences in previous multicultural roles is ideal preparation for a kaleidoscopic collaboration across the employer-employee divide.

### **Is your organisation benefiting from global talent?**

Both Global Cosmopolitans and their employers should seize the opportunity to learn from and re-integrate the shifts in mindset, skillsets and knowledge that diverse cultural experiences bring. Leadership must set the tone by communicating as widely as possible the importance of valuing and benefiting from Global Cosmopolitans.

Conversely, organisations will lose key players (like Isabella) unless they listen, learn and create meaningful opportunities for Global Cosmopolitans to embark upon the next chapter of their lives.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/composing-life-complex-change>

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### **About the author(s)**

**Linda Brimm** is an INSEAD Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour.

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