



Starting Your Career Far From Home

Professionals seeking adventure and accelerated learning take the plunge and ensure they get “far away” early on in their careers.

By Antoine Tirard and Claire Lyell

At a time when there is increasing fear of “others” and “difference” – whether that is played out through the move towards Brexit in the UK, or the success of Donald Trump in the U.S. – we wanted to take a more optimistic look at what happens to people who start their careers far from home. Firstly, what makes them take the step away from home comforts, and then, how differently does their career evolve over time? Does the wanderlust endure? And what kind of permanent changes come about?

We took a look at four successful professionals, each at a different stage of his or her career, and tried to observe patterns and trends, to learn how international assignments can be used more smartly in every business.

Lily’s move to the UK just before finishing high school in China was not even 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 UK

with her mother. However, it was her parents who dictated that she go and complete her secondary education in Oxford, saying that they wanted to spare her the terrors of the notorious Chinese university entrance exams

She's Leaving Home

Lily's move to Oxford went smoothly, and she describes the two years she spent living in a host family as the happiest in her life. Her excitement allowed her not to be homesick, and she began to open her eyes to the cultural differences she faced, never having actually spoken the English language before arriving. On moving on to the prestigious LSE university, Lily had not particularly contemplated staying in the UK beyond her education years. But she started to realise the level of privilege with which she had lived for so long, and decided to fight it for herself. She chose to seek her own job with her own abilities, rather than use her parents' network, as she always had previously.

Having set herself the ambitious goal of obtaining a place on the graduate scheme at a Big Four audit firm, Lily obtained a position at KPMG last year. Only on entering the firm did she realise that until then she had not had any real British friends. She did not lack friends in general, but all of them had been Asian up till then. She was shocked, but decided to use this as a catalyst for change. The process she went through to integrate with a much more largely British population of colleagues than she had been used to included "learning about beer and rugby, reading "To Kill A Mockingbird" and learning about British music". She observes that "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!"

The challenge of what comes next is complex for Lily, as she intends to stay in the UK at least long enough to obtain a full residency permit, and of course to complete her audit training. However she knows there will be expectations of her, as only child, once her parents start to age. She says she likes her life in the UK, and it now feels like home – she has a flat and a mortgage, and she feels happily tied. She



realises she has bigger horizons than her stay at home peers, many of whom are still struggling to find a rewarding job and a place of their own, and she seems very grateful for her relative freedom.

When asked if her values changed, Lily explains she has developed a more long-term point of view and an openness to others that were absent from her life previously, adding "this gives much more meaning to my existence". What is her advice for Chinese students? To get out and socialise, with as many different people as possible. To get uncomfortable, and extend their comfort zone! Lily seems to have done this admirably, developing her adaptability beautifully, and whatever the demands of her parents or society in the future, one cannot help thinking that she will manage that too.

Frenchman Romain has already adapted to more than five cultures and languages in his just under thirty 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 play out these values with regular trips to a variety of countries. 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.

From this early taste of the faraway, he aimed

to get a career in Asia, at whatever cost. However he did not really have much of a plan for how to make this happen. He had already gone away 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. As a result of this introduction, he was hired initially as a project manager for a new event that was due to take place in Hong Kong, but with a view to him spearheading an Asian business for the company.

1,000 Miles Away

Romain has now been in Singapore for almost three years, has built a successful business, and is even discussing a financial stake in the company. His pioneering attitude has paid off. He is now waiting to see whether he can get some “skin in the game”, in which case he will stay around for more stretches where he is, and if that does not work out, then he will look for other challenges, in alternative faraway places. There is also the possibility of opening his own company, and he actively works on ideas at this stage in his life. He is not sure whether this entrepreneurial mindset comes from his time as an expatriate, or if it is due to his life stage.

The work and success that Romain has achieved put him in a position that attracts a number of headhunters, though he is clear on the subject: if he wants to stay in the conference business, he will stay where he is. However, he knows that if he wants to move on, it will be to another international opportunity. He also knows that he is perceived as being more valuable than his friends from university in France, who have been more modest in their travels and careers.

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 goes further, and explains that it feels like going back to boarding school. Not an unhappy boarding school, he is quick to add, but nevertheless a feeling of being “away from

Name
Romain

Nationality
France

First job abroad
**Business Development
Manager, EO ASIA Pte Ltd.**

Location
Singapore

from home”. He very much enjoys his life as an expatriate, but does not seem at this point to be in danger of becoming a local Singaporean!

Another important element in the argument for Romain’s sense of happy non-belonging is the fact that he does not have a serious girlfriend. So, he is free to jump in a plane at the drop of a hat, and not to feel any tension in his travels or work engagements. He recognises that this might well change if and when he finds someone with whom to settle down. He would welcome that if it happened, but also seems happy to pursue his freedom and mobility as long as they last.

On further discussion, we discover that some of his siblings live in other countries, also, and it is thus tempting to believe that the “nurture” part of international living is stronger than ever. 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.

The story of Gabriel, who is now an IT engineer at CapGemini in France, is one of strong contrast to Romain’s. They are of a similar age, but Gabriel has decided to return to France from his sojourn overseas.

Gabriel’s father and mother had a taste for travel, but had not really travelled extensively with their children. A family interest for the classics had led them towards Greece and Italy, but not much further. However, his father pushed him to take Chinese lessons when he started engineering school. Gabriel obeyed,

somewhat unenthusiastically, but nevertheless, this opened his eyes to other opportunities.

When a friend of a friend mentioned an internship experience in a Peugeot Citroën joint venture in China, he sent his CV, realising that the language study would not necessarily help him practically, but its inclusion in his resumé just might convince the potential employer. At this point, he had no specific agenda, but was attracted by doing “something different”.

Despite trying to plan for his arrival in Wuhan, Gabriel was hopelessly unprepared, and had neither a place to live, nor the language skills required. He found it deeply depressing not to be able to communicate in a language he had believed he could manage. Luckily, with help from his manager, he was able to find accommodation and to start to improve his language skills, largely through work and social contact with colleagues.

At first, the working environment was not as shiny as he had expected, and he found himself in 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 prejudices about politics, and so on, and that he was even somewhat scared. As he settled in 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”.

Homeward Bound

As his internship came to a close, 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, returned to Wuhan, this time working on the French side of the joint venture, where he should have felt much more comfortable. However, it appeared this time that homesickness was setting in and that Gabriel was not as suited to expatriation as he had thought. His motivation dropped, his learning curve flattened, and he aimed to return to France as soon as he could.

After an initial trip home over the first



Christmas break, Gabriel began to remove his rose-coloured spectacles. He noticed the pollution, the communication gaps, the spitting in the street, and all that he had managed to ignore previously, while in the honeymoon phase. He managed to get used to it, but not to get beyond, to actually “like” it. He had signed up for eighteen months, and was offered an extension, but he decided to return home at the earliest opportunity.

Contrary to what might be expected, as Gabriel searched for new challenges back home in France, he did not perceive that his foreign experience was valued. He had believed it would be simple to make the transition back to French soil, with a big brand like Peugeot and Chinese work experience, but he was proven wrong. He was changing industry, as well as returning home, and the recruiters did not see this clearly. In the end, Gabriel took a “bridging” job – a compromise, but one that allowed him to subsequently find a great position at CapGemini.

While Gabriel is happy to have returned to his homeland, he does not exclude the possibility of a return to foreign places. Next time it could be somewhere other than China, and he has kept the desire to learn and develop that is so heavily linked with expatriation. He misses the buzz of developing economies and challenging cultural circumstances, so it may not be long before he takes on the next job away from home.

Our final character, Richard, a 55-year-old C-suite executive with oil equipment company

7 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

FMC Technologies, is without any doubt a poster-boy expat, who has not looked back, ever since his first move away from home in New Zealand upon graduation.

Richard 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 his high school years, and he turned out to be gifted with the language, which was to become critical to his success later. Being a good all-rounder made it difficult to choose a particular subject to study at university, but Richard picked Engineering, in the hope that it would take him “out to where the action is”. During his penultimate year, he was lucky enough to do an internship with oil services company Schlumberger in Borneo, and he was, as he says, “hooked”.

He received an offer to return to a long-term position with the company upon graduation,

but then recession hit, and he was left in hiatus for a year. However during that time, he received an invitation to start work very rapidly 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, and he was happy until he was assigned to Australia, where he felt as if he had been sent back home.

The stagnation of this situation was enough to start him looking for alternatives, and he ended up accepting a role with a start-up company in New Zealand. Unexpectedly, this led to him being appointed General Manager of the company within less than a year, and his life became a whirlwind of crazy energy and chaos, in which he learnt a lot, but there was still, according to him, a piece of the puzzle missing.

Richard started trying to analyse what he wanted, and the list included a more predictable, stable life, but overseas and with more responsibility. Failure to be taken seriously for corporate general management roles incited him to find a business school, and he went to INSEAD in France, where he could accomplish the learning required in only 10 months, speak the language he had studied all those thousands of miles away, and learn from others. He was after theory and structure, as he had learnt about management mostly by the seat of his pants.

Having done well in the MBA, it was Richard’s wish to stay in France, or at the very least, Europe. He eventually got the opportunity to take on a role in more general management, with US oil equipment company FMC Technologies, in their operation in the French countryside, not far from the campus of

Name
Richard

Nationality
New Zealand

First job abroad
**Wireline Engineer,
Schlumberger**

Location
Indonesia

10 Attributes You Will Grow (and Are 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 mindset
7. Independence, self-reliance
8. Resilience
9. Self-Awareness
10. Willingness to take risks

INSEAD. He acted as a bridge between the US and French cultures, and became skillful at managing intercultural teams and managers, rapidly becoming the global expert on such matters, and more and more set apart from his peers due to this agile quality.

Wherever I Lay My Hat

For the past twenty years, Richard's career has continued to develop within FMC, with postings in Germany, then back to France, where Richard and his American wife have a beautiful chateau, and feel that they are at home here. They keep allegiance to their own countries, cultures and languages, but their third country means that they keep balance. Many of the past ten years have been spent in the headquarters of FMC, in Houston, but Richard and the family keep their links up with their adopted home.

When asked to what he ascribes his success, Richard is quick to talk about a willingness to go anywhere and do anything, to get far beyond his comfort zone. He uses the word "adventure" a lot, and cites adaptability as a key competency for international careers. 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."

There is also much talk of the need for solid leaders, with experience of adapting frequently to new and uncomfortable situations. He sees a huge lack of this kind of skill in those he interviews for roles in his team, and feels this to be a real threat to the future of business. Young people need more experience of 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.

Where is home for someone like Richard at this point in his career? The easiest answer is "in the French countryside", but of course, day

to day, it is in Houston, and each parent has a strong love of homeland and family. While still working, Richard will continue to shuttle between Houston and France, but on "retirement", which he hopes will involve board and community work, there will be a split of time between New Zealand, USA and France.

As an adaptable leader, this kind of geographical challenge is not a big deal for someone like Richard, and there is great hope that with leaders like this, businesses and economies will move forward with speed and agility, bringing people together with what they have in common, as opposed to dividing by difference, as seems to be all too common in many political and economic situations today.

We see that the more exposure a young person has to travel, to difference, to risk and challenge, the more likely he or she is to seek more adventure in his or her professional life. Travel and 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.

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. As these stories indicate quite clearly, the benefits of jobs far away from home are numerous, far-reaching and long-lasting.

We believe that the advice given by our subjects is valid, and that all those seeking not just career success, but also a great, engaging and satisfying life, take the plunge and ensure they get "far away" early on in their careers.

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