

The global careerist: Internal and external supports needed for success

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There are many types of internationally mobile workers and families, including expatriates, repatriates, accompanying partners, and 'third culture kids'. This research used an email survey to gather input from six global careerists. Respondents were asked about their definitions of success (personal and professional), their career challenges (personal, social, and professional problems), and their supports (social, work experience, attitude, previous transition experience, and organizations/resources). There were similarities and differences amongst the six respondents' experiences with international mobility. Better understanding the challenges and unique needs of global careerists can help counsellors to more effectively serve this growing group of workers.

In an era of globalization and increased interconnectedness via the Internet the 'world as a workplace' is a reality for more people than in the past. Whether migrant workers relocating for temporary work, expatriates relocating longer term but not permanently (in some cases with their accompanying partners and/or children), immigrants choosing a new country as home base, international students choosing to stay in their new country post-graduation, refugees seeking haven in a country that provides sanctuary or repatriates returning 'home' after working abroad, international workers or 'global careerists' face a unique set of career and life challenges.

This article presents highlights from relevant literature followed by results from a survey of six participants whose careers have involved international transitions: one working expatriate, two accompanying partner expatriates (one of whom was self-employed), one 'third culture kid' (i.e., an adult child from an expatriate family, impacted by international mobility),

and three repatriates. Although results from this exploratory research cannot be generalized without further investigation, several themes surfaced across the participants, illustrating potential commonalities amongst global careerists. However, differences are also presented that illustrate the need to customize career supports. The article concludes with a discussion of external and internal supports that contribute to career success and ideas about how career workers can more effectively serve the globally mobile workforce.



Literature review

Although the term 'global careerist' is more commonly used in the business literature (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2011; Suutari and Smale, 2008) than in counselling (Neault, 2007), it has been adopted in this article to describe various types of internationally mobile workers. To provide effective career supports it is important to understand the diverse needs of this growing group. This review discusses literature from international business, international education, human resources, counselling and career development to shed new light on the complexity of global careers. Siljanen and Lamsa (2009: 1468) described the 'heterogeneity of expatriates' and it is important to recognise that individuals may bridge several global careerist categories at various stages of their careers. For example, third culture kids may concurrently be international students. Upon graduation, they may repatriate to their passport countries but share the experience of immigrants or expatriate workers if they have not previously lived or worked in that country.

Accompanying partners may establish their careers and then, themselves, take on an expatriate assignment; reversing roles with their spouses for the next stage of both careers. Even within some of the sub-categories of global careerists, there are differences. Altman and Baruch (2011), for example, described a continuum of expatriate workers with low-skilled migrant workers at one end of the spectrum and highly skilled professionals and senior leaders at the other. Tornikoski (2011) used the categories of 'assigned' and 'self-initiated' to discuss different types of expatriates.

Deciding whether or not to accept an opportunity to work internationally, for many employees, is influenced by the impact the move will have on their immediate families (Larson, 2006). For those who choose to relocate, their accompanying partners' careers are typically affected, too (Permits Foundation, 2012; Simpson and Wiles, 2012). Children of global careerist parents tend to form cultural identities that are informed by their parents' cultures combined with the differing local cultures in which they've lived (Bonebright, 2010; Ittel and Sisler, 2012). The term 'third culture kids' (TCKs) is used to describe these children, who may identify more closely with other TCKs than with the cultures of their own families or passport countries. Once grown up and ready to enter the workforce, their needs and unique contributions to the global workplace may be easily misunderstood or overlooked (Ittel and Sisler, 2012).

Wadhwa, Saxenian, Freeman, and Gereffi (2009) used the term 'returnee' to describe those who have lived and worked abroad and choose to return 'home'. Wadhwa et al described this as increasingly common in developing economies such as India and China; however, it is also a trend that is expanding to address skill shortages in countries like New Zealand.

The needs of internationally mobile workers are diverse as they are impacted by generational differences (Wilson and Snowdon, 2012), loneliness (Sow Hup and Hua Han (2011), and the challenges of getting foreign credentials and professional experiences recognized in a new country (Lamontagne, 2003) or upon returning home (Bolino, 2007; Menzies and Lawrence, 2011). International students who choose to stay in their host country face career challenges (Sangganjanavanich, Lenz, and Cavazos,

2011). Amongst skilled immigrant workers a pattern of career compromise is often apparent (Lau, 2010). However, although mobility-based work-family conflicts are common (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2011) and family issues have been found to have the most significant influence on an employee's decision about whether to accept an international posting, career aspirations were also identified as important (Larson, 2006). Almost a decade ago, Neault (2005) highlighted challenges in managing global careers; this brief review of relevant literature demonstrates that these challenges remain and, therefore, the need for career professionals to learn how to better serve internationally mobile workers is of critical importance.

Theoretical Perspectives / Influences

Several theoretical perspectives may help conceptualize the unique career challenges and needs of global careerists. Although beyond the scope of this article to describe them in detail, a few relevant theories and models are briefly listed here with citations to support further investigation of those that seem most relevant.

Transition models (Bridges, 2009; Schlossberg, 2011) can serve as useful frameworks for careers impacted by global mobility. Much has been written within the past two decades on 'boundaryless careers', emphasizing a new type of psychological contract between individuals and employing organizations (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Stahl, Miller, and Tung, 2002; Suutari and Smale, 2008), focussing on career agency within an increasingly interdependent global society (Tams and Arthur, 2010), and delineating the importance of optimism. This is important, as Neault (2002) found optimism to be the most significant predictor of career success and job satisfaction. In Career Flow, with hope at the centre of the model, an optimistic attitude is also considered important (Niles, Amundson and Neault, 2011).

Finally, Neault and Pickerell's (2011) Career Engagement model highlights the critical importance of aligning capacity (both individual and organizational) to level of challenge; many global careerists find themselves overwhelmed (too much challenge) or underutilized (capacity left untapped). Optimism is one

contributor to capacity within this model, recognizing the dynamic interaction between individual, organizational, and societal influences on career engagement.

Method

To further explore challenges experienced by global careerists and supports they identify as contributing to their success, an open-ended survey comprising five questions and a multiple-choice 'poll' posted on LinkedIn were conducted. We were particularly interested in the impact of locality or 'place' on their career experiences, both when working abroad and returning home. Our strengths-based research approach was informed by Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson and Erlebach (2010).

The survey explored definitions of successful international transitions, barriers encountered, helpful supports and family impact. Participants shared surprises associated with their transitions and insights about what changes might improve similar future transitions. Surveys were emailed to selected contacts within the authors' personal and professional networks; both authors are Canadian, with one currently living in Canada and the other in the Netherlands. Of 13 invitations, 6 respondents (46%) completed the survey and the accompanying informed consent document with demographic questionnaire. This is a convenience sample that can not be considered representative of all global careerists.

Survey results were themed within NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. Data entry and preliminary clustering were conducted by a research assistant; further theming was conducted independently by the authors. Although the themes reveal some commonalities across global careerists, notable differences, especially between different types of global careerists, also surfaced.

In addition to the survey the researchers used the polling feature on LinkedIn. A single question with five multiple choice options was posted in the authors' personal networks as well as in four relevant groups: Trailing Spouse Network, Portable Career Network, Career in Your Suitcase and Connecting Women. The poll explored which support had been most important

to the respondents' successful international career transition(s) – network, attitude, career services, cultural fit or qualifications. The poll was open for one month, reposted once, shared on Facebook, and Tweeted to followers; it resulted in 12 responses.

Results

All six survey respondents completed a demographic profile. Ranging in age from 25 to 63 years old, most were female ($n=5$), all identified English as the only language they spoke fluently and were married or with a live-in partner, and two had one child currently at home. Although two were in the process of repatriating, they both self-identified as 'citizens'. One self-identified as a third culture kid (TCK). Another respondent, self-identifying as an expatriate, also described a global career beginning as a TCK, and comprising stints as an immigrant, expatriate worker, repatriate and accompanying partner. Another respondent self-identified as an immigrant, expatriate and repatriate. Each of these respondents was an example of the complexity of global careerists' experiences and identity. The final respondent, self-identifying as an expatriate, was an accompanying partner currently self-employed.

Most respondents were well-educated with various levels of post-secondary education. Most were currently working in a field related to their professional identity, although one accompanying partner was in an entry-level job supporting a partner's repatriation process. One accompanying partner self-identified as retired. One global careerist, self-identified as an immigrant, expatriate and repatriate, described eclectic fields of work but didn't align with any single profession. Another identified three roles within two fields. The final respondent identified one field of work but listed several roles that contributed to self-employment income.

Definitions of Success

Participants were asked 'What does success mean for you in this international transition?' Their definitions clustered into two broad categories – personal and professional. Personal responses indicating intrinsic success measures included 'establishing a new normal including a sense of belonging and identity congruence',

‘emotional resilience’, ‘constructing a home that was a safe haven’, and ‘developing meaningful relationships in my life here’; ‘staying in close communication with my family... and creating a happy home environment’. Indicators of professional success involved such extrinsic outcomes as securing suitable employment (e.g. ‘a position which... pays well’, ‘recognition of my peers’, ‘finishing up my exams and getting registered ... [and] finding a full time job in my career’ as well as intrinsic characteristics including ‘a position which challenges me’ and ‘finding a career that is interesting and fulfilling... in which I could work long-term’).

Although all respondents said that their family/ significant others shared their perspectives on success, it was interesting to find that, for all but two, their definitions of success had shifted during their transitions. One shift was from focusing on finding a challenging part-time paid position with peer recognition to accepting that those needs would be filled by volunteer positions and not paid employment. Another shift, for an accompanying partner of an international student, was from ‘just putting in time’ to ‘embracing the life-enriching experience’. One respondent reported shifting from a somewhat mechanistic understanding of what international transition asks of a person to a broader understanding which recognised the time required to ‘work your way back to a feeling of belonging’. However, when partners’ definitions of success do not shift concurrently, support may decrease; this will be further discussed in the following sections.

Challenges

The challenges that emerged from the data also clustered into personal and professional. Respondents described how personal challenges in re-establishing social networks impacted their familial relationships as well as their own emotional wellbeing and adjustment. Similar social challenges were reported as respondents rebuilt their professional networks – several had underestimated the time required for these important tasks. Other examples of professional challenges included: the need to take a survival job because of the length of time required to complete the credential recognition process, the impact of ‘credential creep’ upon opportunities available following repatriation, the challenge of finding opportunities that adequately

connect with values and interests, labour market and work culture differences, transferability of credentials and experience, and work permit restrictions.

Supports

Participants were asked ‘What supports helped you transition successfully?’ The supports described by respondents clustered into five sub-themes, very similar to those described by previous researchers: social, work experience, attitude, previous transition experience and organizations/resources. Significant social supports included partners and other family members, neighbours, church, support groups/fairs, local involvement and maintaining important past connections. Several respondents described the importance of finding suitable work, whether a survival job for immediate financial support, volunteering as an outlet for meaningful contribution or a complete career change to accommodate the realities of working in another country. Respondents also described important attitudes that contributed to their successful transitions; these included resilience, self-confidence, creating a safe haven at home and learning to be alone without feeling lonely.

Several respondents reported positive contributions from previous transition experiences, both domestic and international; learning from past transitions prepared them for future challenges and helped minimise personal and career disruptions and maximize resettlement success.

Finally, respondents indicated the benefit of accessing such organisational supports and resources as professional associations, recruiters and placement agencies, company relocation services and support groups, online information and career services.

Lessons Learned

Respondents identified a variety of changes that could positively impact their future international transitions. Suggestions for enhanced supports included access to career services, financial support for credential recognition, language studies, retraining, expediting the foreign credential recognition process and access to mentors. One respondent recommended increased holiday time for expatriate workers to facilitate

maintaining connections with family and friends abroad. Another respondent recommended mentors to support repatriates – someone who could help translate the value of international experience for the local labour market.

Combined, these results underscore the range and complexity of issues experienced by global careerists. Although more research is needed to confirm and further explore the patterns identified here and the supports most effective for success with international transitions, the preliminary findings are explored in the following section.

Discussion

It is clear from the literature and supported by the information gathered through this survey that global careerists are not all created equal. In each experience the desired outcomes of the individual, resources and supports available and the response to challenges and barriers, contributes to a different reality. Global careerists themselves often do not realise or recognise that they have become part of a growing group that has a great deal of information and resources available.

Therefore, career development professionals working with internationally mobile clients need to first take time to explore and understand the individual circumstances of these clients. For example, one accompanying partner reported being supported by a temp agency to find work opportunities that met a 20-hour per week work visa restriction. As often occurs, credentials from one country were not recognized in the next; despite this, a life-enriching international experience resulted from the individual's adaptability, positive attitude and willingness to accept lower-skilled work while embracing unique opportunities to connect with locals. However, it is possible that a career advisor with a stronger understanding of the issues associated with global careers may have been able to assess for transferable skills and experiences and to recommend more suitable part-time employment. As described in the Career Engagement model (Neault and Pickerell, 2011), although many foreign-trained workers report feeling under-utilized in their positions, others feel overwhelmed as they are asked to do unfamiliar tasks or communicate in a language they are still learning.

There are, however, specific areas of focus for career professionals who support global careerists through their international transitions. A few are highlighted in the following sections, clustered into external strategies, supports, and services and internal characteristics and attitudes that career practitioners and counsellors can help global careerists to strengthen.

External strategies, supports and services

Our research demonstrates that successful global careerists employ a range of strategies including:

1. **Joining and forming networks.** Concurrently maintaining local and global networks can be particularly important to career portability (Parfitt and Reichrath-Smith, 2013). Respondents identified the importance of both formal and informal personal and professional networks (e.g. friends, family, and professional colleagues). Career professionals could help by teaching networking skills with a cultural awareness component or supporting clients to identify a group of individuals in transition and form a peer support network or 'success team' (Sher, 2003).
2. **Connecting to local communities.** Oliver Segovia (as cited in Parfitt and Reichrath-Smith, 2013) suggested looking outwards to the local surroundings for direction and purpose; he cautioned that only looking inwards invites disconnection and disillusionment. Therefore, becoming aware of the values and issues that connect and drive the local community and getting involved where there is a good fit with skills, experience and dreams can be another effective career management strategy.
3. **Accessing key supporters.** Family and friends can provide reminders of previous accomplishments and encouragement during times of self doubt. Trusted supporters can also fill in blind spots (Business Balls, n.d.); in an international relocation, without cultural insights, 'you don't know what you don't know'.
4. **Identifying and engaging potential mentors.** Whether formal or informal, mentors can help global careerists interpret and action local

information, transfer knowledge, learn skills and reflect on lessons learned. One respondent indicated this as something she would have appreciated as part of her repatriation process. In the Netherlands, for example, a voluntary association of language mentors is available.

5. **Accessing career services.** A career development professional with insights into global career-related issues can help build a relocation strategy, market international experience in the current location, interpret the policies of regional or national accreditation bodies, provide access to groups of similar individuals, and set realistic timelines and expectations.
6. **Learning the local language.** Although it is important to set realistic expectations of what is linguistically achievable within the available timeframe, building language competency offers a key to understanding culture and connecting with local neighbours, service providers, and colleagues in a more meaningful way.

Internal characteristics and attitudes

Although external strategies, supports and services are important, and were highly valued by respondents, internal supports also impact upon the success of international transitions. Several important characteristics and attitudes that career professionals can help strengthen are highlighted in this section.

1. **Strong sense of self:** Many global careerists report a struggle between cultural adaptation and assimilation - the ongoing tension between fitting in and remaining authentic to their core identities. Developing a career portfolio can be an effective strategy; portfolios can serve as a place where experiences, accomplishments, life stories, important hobbies and defining moments are collected, organized and presented in such a way that they can be used to support all aspects of career development, including international transitions and the risk of a sense of lost identity (Parfitt and Reichrath-Smith, 2013).
2. **Flexible attitude:** Successful international transitions, as described by respondents to this study, often involve shifts in how success is defined as well as letting go of some culturally bound beliefs without giving up. Enhancing their flexibility can help global careerists to stay actively engaged in the present instead of longing for the past.
3. **Holistic view of career:** Successful global careerists tend to have a broad sense of the components comprising their 'career;' they are not limited by their former professions or job titles. Several respondents to this study described an eclectic combination of work, life and learning roles, paid and unpaid, that together contributed to their engagement and satisfaction. Career professionals can help individuals explore their career beliefs; in turn, this type of activity will provide insights into the client's perspective.
4. **Ability to connect:** Openness to share struggles and ask for help creates a stronger feeling of connection. One respondent reflected, 'the biggest hurdle is the emotional one - of working your way back to a feeling of belonging, feeling fully vested and involved in your new life, and enjoying it - and it takes more time and effort than I'd thought'. Career professionals can provide a vital link for clients in the early stages of an international transition.
5. **Willingness to grow and change:** Successful global careerists are open to new experiences, allowing themselves to learn through, and be shaped by, those experiences. A posting to Thought Catalogue, a blog for expatriates, summed up this attitude well, 'There is a certain amount of comfort and confidence that you gain with yourself when you go to this new place and start all over again, and a knowledge that - come what may in the rest of your life - you were capable of taking that leap and landing softly at least once' (Fagan, 2012). Career professionals could support global careerists to benchmark required competencies, mine previous experiences for transferable skills, examine career beliefs and build confidence.
6. **Creative problem-solving:** To make successful international transitions, global careerists need to anticipate and acknowledge barriers and setbacks without being stopped by them. They become adept at workarounds, negotiating alternatives

and cobbling together what they want and need. An exercise from improvisational theatre, 'Yes, AND!' is a tool career development professionals can use to help global careerists respond more effectively to unexpected developments they regularly encounter.

Conclusion

Global careerists are a growing and diverse group with complex needs. For career development professionals to effectively serve them, it is important to recognize the unique challenges encountered during their international transitions and the types of internal characteristics and attitudes and external supports, services and strategies that they have identified as effective. This preliminary research explored six stories of international mobility. Expanding this research to include representatives from a wider range of global careerists at various stages of their international transitions would further illustrate the heterogeneity of this group and help to surface the supports and strategies that contribute to their success. Research testing the efficacy of career services and interventions for the globally mobile would also fill a gap in the literature, facilitating more evidence-based practices for career professionals serving this growing group.

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