

Shanghai Expatriate

*What It Is Really Like to Be At the Forefront
of an Overseas Experience*



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Introduction

I often times think of my working life as one of a white collar professional migrant, a migratory worker not unlike my nation's Hispanics trying to find work and support a family existence in diverse agricultural communities all over America. News accounts of Poles migrating into Germany also have filled media coverage. For that matter, what I have been doing is not particularly unlike that of hundreds of millions of rural Chinese workers heading off to unknown cities and unpredictable jobs, in the world of the twenty-first century occupational displacement. I recall reading an article in one of America's leading newspapers about the plight of U.S.-based airline pilots who have seen their flying careers derailed, now yet another form of migrant worker, quite possibly entering the flight deck as an Asian carrier's pilot-in-command. I was absolutely stunned the first time I heard an American voice over the aircraft (Boeing 777) public address system, discussing our en route travels, weather, and in-flight amenities. On Korean Air! And it has happened many times since, all over Asia. First, in what I chose to refer to as the new occupational world order, women in the cockpit, now Americans! What next, my fellow passengers must have been thinking. I could sense that something was up.

Not too long after that article caught my attention, I was on an overseas flight with an overnight stopover for a meeting in Seoul (Incheon) South Korea, whereupon my stay included a night at the airport's gleaming new Hyatt Hotel across the airport access road from Incheon International. During the shuttle van ride over to the hotel, I had a brief but delightful conversation with a flight crew (captain and first officer), one Canadian and the other a swashbuckling American pilot right out of Hollywood casting – square jawed, intelligent, slim & trim, with a military spit-shine on his shoes and his uniform still neat and well tailored. This is, sad to say, a departure from what I have been seeing in airports throughout the United States for quite some time – many years in fact – the pot belly, applets tarnished, perhaps a trouser belt loop torn away, wolfing down a burger dripping with condiments. Yes I have actually witnessed that, more than once. My uncle was a Korean War U.S. Air Force pilot-veteran, and married my aunt as he moved into civilian aviation life after the conflict, of course a flight attendant – and he had that “right stuff” content. Being a pilot in Asia is still seen as glamorous, dignified, respected, a great working life. And it shows in their courtesy, demeanor, attire and grooming, physical appearance. Lest I digress. However there is a point to be made. You can figure it out.

So during the course of our van ride to the hotel, both pilots agreed that it was either mega-commute flying for one of Asia-Pacific's increasingly glamorous airlines, and wrap up a fine career in another hemisphere, or go back to the U.S. and just be confined to selling car stereos at one of the nameless appliance or electronics retail establishments. And so, another migrant worker scenario for the 21st century unfolded as I figured out what I wanted this article to be about. This is the essence of my story. This essay is not intended to be yet another management guru, MBA-ish “how-to” go to Asia, China in particular. Too many of them have invaded the bookstore shelves already – and to be certain, I have read them all. It is just my story, one of a kid from rural Ohio who never saw this unusual life on his radar. Sure enough I followed my World War II father from

engineering and business school into American Industrial Manufacturing Might. He had a distinguished career at Ford Motor Co. and Bendix-Allied, morphed into present-day Honeywell. My topsy-turvy Baby Boomer occupational effort was equally divided between two titans of fluid power manufacturing: Aeroquip-Vickers (now Eaton Corp.) and their Cleveland, Ohio cross town rival Parker Hannifin Corp. As it says on my company website, I did it all: technical field sales, global OEM account management, operations, product development, new market development, international program management, etc. It was a good life for my family and I, sacrifices and all. But along the way, the rules began to change rather early on. And I watched it all as a participant working all over the United States, with assignments as well in Europe, South America, and Asia. I was on the front lines, not figuratively, but actually boots-on-the-ground.

I was decidedly not watching from the sidelines, as some professional journalists might have, who lay claim to front line duty. I was truly in the trenches – on the front lines in virtually way – in front of the customer; in the factories and shipyards, auto plants, endless planning meetings, geo-political happenings, aviation mishaps, and all of the rest. This is not in any way an attempt to downplay what others have seen and written about in their Asian experiences or other overseas travels, merely my working life as an initially ill-prepared participant in the globalization of corporate and personal life as we all have come to know it today. Some of us more than others I suppose. There remains a pair of takeaways from my years working in foreign lands. The first is that no one is every fully prepared for working overseas. No, the Peace Corps as a backpacking youngster does not count. No so-called intercultural workshops of dubious capabilities (and I've been through many of them) do the trick. Second, travel reading and academic pedigree searching is not the complete answer, although I admit that any training is better than none at all. So many snake oil language-cultural-academic types have massaged sales pitches and circled boardrooms like locusts in a field. The majority of whom have never even been to that country of their professed instructional know-how, or occupied a daily seat in the corporate divisional headquarters or manufacturing facility, such as their client's inner sanctum. On the other hand, some of us can say, "been there, done that" and have for a long time, been too busy to sit down and write yet another book.

This effort is dedicated of course to my family, without whose support, nothing in my life would have amounted to a hill of beans. Equally important, I wish to acknowledge within this essay all of those "pathfinders" as I call them, who took on their employers' foreign assignments even before it became fashionable or sexy, who pioneered life in places such a Brazil, Europe, Asia – China in particular – long before it really became comfortable to do so, or prior to an army of wannabees from Western student life or academia, or God-forbid, professional consulting invaded the East. These courageous expatriate people got things started in the early 1980s in China, saw the Berlin Wall fall while coming and going from work, went back to Vietnam after normalized relations with the U.S. They are the ones that taught me, and those are people that I still admire and look up to. But most of them seem content to sit back, retire, and not tell their story.

Let us deal with a few caveats and a disclaimer or two, before we go headlong into the meat of this writing. I am not a journalist or professional writer, nor am I an academic or

think-tank researcher. I am just, by most accounts, a good story teller given numerous statements over many years by my peers, colleagues, family members, teachers and long-past away parents. Thus this document is written in a conversational format, devoid of MBA-isms and tiresome footnotes, mega-words or such.

Indeed, I have been called highly opinionated. Passionate about my work has been both a criticism and a compliment during the discourse and awful drudgery of the annual performance review. I have been admonished as a deep thinker, although I still haven't figured out why such as a shallow guy as a former boss would come up with that one. I owe everything to the work teams (foreign and domestic) over several decades that helped me in so many ways. This work is entirely, 100 percent non-fiction. It is not a kiss-and-tell drama. This is no place for sour grapes or pettiness, or just plain being irritable. Opinionated yes, but that has not stopped many on television and radio, movies, and music, from producing published work, often perceived as ranting and raving maybe, but still providing their thoughts and view of the world as they see it.

I shall attempt to do everything possible to provide nothing but a complete and totally factual account of life as an expatriate in Shanghai, China along with extensive living experiences all over the Asia-Pacific theatre of operations. And life elsewhere in our world community. Profanity is for the most part, off limits here. No name calling, no retribution against (perceived) past wrongs, not a morsel of angst. Only a read that I felt was long overdue (then again, doesn't every author?), especially for those sending someone overseas, going on a foreign assignment, or watching from afar as a family member or trusted colleague-friends embarks on what will surely become a life-changing journey in their professional career. It is intended to become a pleasant read, not to sell billable hours or some such nonsense. Neither will it likely lead to a national book tour. But indeed, it is sincerely hoped that you have a few minutes of fun reading it.

The writing here is intentionally simple, not to solicit careful review by pseudo-intellectual literary types or to show off some sort of absent-yet-desired enhanced vocabulary intent. The peer review is focused upon those folks who wonder what it is really like living overseas and developing a career that has included a foreign assignment. I am not talking about a year-or-two either. At last count, I have been "on the road" most of my adult life, which at 55 years, say a lot quite possibly. Asia in particular had been my home for 15 of those recent years, and continues to be so. Since everyone is currently rather interested in Mainland China, and due to the fact that I have been there for 15 years running, why not elect to choose that platform as the storyline for the book, okay? I went from barely able to spell a-s-i-a, so long ago, to now calling it my second home. While I do cherish my little blue United States passport and remain devoted to America, it can be said that there is life outside the U.S. Being an "ugly American" never hounded me. Frankly, I have seen ugly behavior out of virtually every nationality with whom I have crossed paths. Instead, one could have referred to me as the minimally informed American citizen. It seems that we all are that way in the beginning. I still see it every day when "they" come over for a visit to see us in Asia. Europeans need to learn also. My early indoctrination into life in Asia consisted of two individual eight hour days in an employer conference room, learning a few cute conversational phrases, a cultural nuance

or two, and learning to hold chopsticks at lunch. No history, social protocol, business etiquette, insider politics advisories, visa processing issues, health concerns, housing. And frustrating as it was, the teaching came from a well known language instruction and cultural indoctrination services provider who has been in business for many years.

Boots On the Ground

I definitely did not ask for the original foreign assignment that propelled me into this lifestyle. My employer at the time had been sending me overseas for 2-3 week stints, here-and-there; mainly to monitor product development activities, formulate global OEM account integration strategies, build or expand/remodel a factory and/or office, and so forth. Such was the task at hand. Go perform the work, report back, move on. I did the best that I could, and with the patience and kind help of so many colleagues, it all seemed to work out. The mission was conducted with consummate professionalism and considerable joy at work well done by a cohesive and newly motivated international team. I felt proud of what we were doing – and now doing more effectively on a global scale. However there were still so many pieces to the puzzle missing. Why me? Was this a fast track in my career? Was I running errands overseas that senior management did not want to do? Would this work somehow develop into a long-term international career? Can promotion consequences become part of the equation? What could I possibly have to offer up, other than a multiple-decade resume in one specific industry, with reliable contacts and solid product knowledge? I was very good at my job, but clueless as to life overseas – in Asia! Not to mention unable to speak a word of any Asian language. Alas, management told me that that was okay, no problem. My foreign colleagues all had some element of command of the English language. Big problem.

As such I continued to write the obligatory trip reports, make field assessments of what was taking place throughout the industry, and schmoozing with customers on a comfortable-if-not-lavish expense report. The words *missionary work* became part of my corporate and divisional operations speech-making exercises, when called upon to deliver a state-of-the-whatever slide overview for a particular portion of my employer's global reach. I acquired airline frequent flyer and hotel points. But so what? What did I really know and understand – “out there” oceans away?

I like to make fun of what I refer to as MBA-isms: *core competency*, *paradigm shift*, *balanced assessments*, *5S*, *Lean insight*, *implied synergies* – my goodness there are so many of them nowadays. Mostly nonsensical to be very certain. Common sense about sound operations rationale should rule the day, not propped up by flavor of the month sloganeering or trendy-fad theories. I've sat through more of these sessions than anyone should have to in 25 years of big company life. There is one however, that I tend to cling to enthusiastically. That is the notion of an enterprise's global reach. When this topic surfaces during a conversation or presentation, I typically comment on the fact that for most multi-national corporations, U.S.-based in particular (let's say the Fortune 500), their global reach actually saw its primary origins as moving into the former Western Europe marketplace after the Second World War, mainly during the 1960s and 1970s.

Asia was always a tough nut to crack, and for the most part continued to be either isolated and underdeveloped, if not completely closed, such as with China. And there are many reasons why senior management's comfort zone was entirely dedicated to Europe, not the least of which involved similar racial and ethnic-cultural backgrounds. The Asian travel jet-lag is brutal, the foods delightful-but-different. Especially when my then-boss would hasten to request an emergency trip to Mc Donald's. Yes, they taste the same in Asia.

My words may have an air of being a corporate rebel, which I never was. I was for a quarter century the company man through and through. I was not downsized, retired early out to pasture, or re-engineering out of any job. It was simply time to move on, to leave and attempt to illustrate that fact that I definitely had an entrepreneurial instinct that had not been satiated at any time during my working adult life. That should set the record straight about my career background. Since 2004, my company Waymark, has had as its charter, replicating pretty much all of the components of the work that I had been doing during the previous quarter century, now on my own terms. Several of us in Asia discussed this thoroughly many times prior to pulling the trigger. Business models come and go, and for my former industry, virtually everything became up for grabs.

Asian work was never for the faint of heart. Hot and humid summers, typhoons and earthquakes, snakes and mangy dogs, peculiar foods, exceedingly difficult languages, enormous time zone changes and resulting jet-lag seemingly lasting forever, ceremonial binge drinking, and the ever-present "us versus them" mindsets (perhaps war related) always made Asia one of those "we'll attend to it down the road" planning strategies. Then all of a sudden, it snuck up on us. Asia's not only alive and well, but prospering. And today well, we can talk until the cows – or water buffalo – come home, about the 21st century, and what is at stake. The Asian Century seems to be thrust upon all of us involved in global commerce, politics, the environment, military interdependence, or anything else one can dream up. After heading to the Asia-Pacific region a few brief times, I would invoke this kind of rhetoric in far too many company meetings, exercising passion for the work at hand, embracing a sense of mission, pursuing annual report analysis with increased vigor which now called for recognition of my new Asian colleagues and "best friends." Then one day, HQ called my bluff. But I wasn't bluffing.

With a newly built custom house in the Minneapolis area, life was entirely cozy and comfortable. The work was rewarding and predictable. After several corporate nomad relocations, we found a place to settle into for many years, perhaps forever. While my occupational creativity was not so much in demand, there was the annual holiday party, boating on Lake Minnetonka, an occasional golf outing, or barbecue with fellow employees. As the old saying goes, life truly was good. On all fronts, life became comfortable. Even though I never got into the local team's bowling or softball leagues, or fantasy football pools, I still began to feel as if I belonged to a cohesive working group. Doing what people such as I have done for a living, coupled with many moves, a person in such a career mold rarely becomes assimilated into the local society or fully immersed within the social circle represented by mostly local colleagues, who have never lived anywhere else. It seems to be an unwritten prerequisite for international work. No firm ties in one place. But this time around we gained ground quickly within the sphere

of my employer's collegial environment. People in Minnesota, while often described as clannish, became friendly quickly. Our kids firmly entrenched in high school activities, a spouse immersed in work and the community, a church family, plus time to finish off remodeling the basement recreational room and buy a billiard table. Indeed life was grand. Leisure downstairs took on the atmosphere of living in a Minnesota north woods lodge. I had reached my comfort zone. Or so I thought...

And then one day, the telephone rang at my desk. And life has never been the same.

The Expatriate Experience

People living and working in a country other than their homeland are commonly referred to expatriates, as you likely already know. They come in all shapes and sizes, a multitude of backgrounds – both occupationally and culturally – as well as possessing experiences that run the entire spectrum of foreign assignments. I can think of a number of examples such as an executive from Holland, living in London, with 12 years of experience in 10 jobs crossing country borders. Another executive scenario is based in Beijing, born in Singapore, having lived in Australia and Xian, China – and is now responsible for the China subsidiary of a U.S. company in Beijing. There was a Swedish-born manager, now based in Zurich, with 14 years expatriated to Germany, Singapore, then Japan. Or finally, the person who was born in India, and now living in Singapore, responsible for operations in 8 countries as diverse as Pakistan and South Korea.

There is a term that I picked up on during both my graduate education studies as well as hearing over-and-over again while stationed overseas. The notion of boundarylessness has roots going all the way back to the first photographs of earth rising from the moon, since then we've been awed by how small our planet really is. And so it is with business – the very idea of national boundaries has been replaced by non-existent geopolitical boundaries, and the need for organizations to become truly global is now self-evident. However, the recognition of training and supporting expatriates remains absent.

Struggles and Challenges

While the list below may have even more components that can be added to this mix of difficulties when living abroad, if you take a look at the composition of these factors, one can begin to appreciate what living and working in a foreign land is all about.

Company mega-mergers	Joint ventures with foreign partners	Acquisitions
Facilities planning	Facilities construction	Emerging markets
Global Competitors	Technology evolution	Language
Geo-political disruptions	Culture, Tradition, Religion	Terrorism
Currency fluctuations	Time Zones	Foods
Values & Rules	Norms for behavior	The press, media
Banking system issues	Accounting transparency	Labor laws
Compensation & Benefits	Trade laws, tariffs, quotas	Logistics “fees”
Geography & Climate	Health care providers	Diseases & health
Stress in the workplace	Personal isolation	Identity crisis

As the reader can plainly see, many factors become critical both during the job preparations for overseas assignments, along with during the presumed preparatory training exercises developed by the employer for those traveling abroad. And each and every element as listed above must be absolutely one hundred per cent comprehended and honestly understood by the organization setting sail for foreign lands, and with complete grasp by the newly assigned employee and his/her family. Any of these factors misunderstood, not realized, or ignored, are at the peril of the company-institution and the employee! I cannot emphasize enough just how important it is to give the employee help.

The Employee Development Model

Among the most important factors in the formulation of a strategic plan to extend both the organization’s global reach as well as deciding which employees become members of that close-knit fraternity of international assignment workers is how to develop people and organizational charts for overseas placement. If experience is the teacher, then who gets the important experience? It is often times said that talent is the ability to learn from experience. Organizations need some mechanism or process that determines who gets what experience. Along with the decision-making process, a group of decision-makers must rely on what should be referred to as catalysts; the things an organization or boss can do which will facilitate learning (which at times, may be doing nothing actually).

There are a multitude of personal and occupational attributes that will definitely distinguish a position between domestic assignments and international assignments. Can these qualities be learned, or are they “natural” gifts and predispositions? One’s ability to work across cultures is an essential competency in the genuine global executive. It is essential to adapt to different cultures and learning to adapt to these unusual cultural

nuances often times turns out to be more difficult than acquiring the business lessons. It is one thing to know your industry and products, your inter-company politics, personnel contact roster, and competitors. However it remains of paramount importance to further expand your knowledge base to include the assignment nation's history and politics, human relations policies in general terms, geography, and direction of the country's economy and the moods of its citizens. It is learned and felt, understood, and implied.

When the "mission" commences, it is not too early to consider the prospects of repatriation back home. The country to which a person is assigned, the hemisphere or geographic region, will play a large part in the adaptability of the employee to bring their mind and enthusiasm back to the home base for both their personal and professional lives. One reason companies consistently have difficulty with repatriation is precisely that so much of what is learned is personal, that the personal learning can be much more powerful than the business learning, and that those personal lessons are not always or obviously relevant to the next business setting. Global executives develop a broader perspective than their domestic counterparts. It is this unique perspective which indeed underlies the elusive quality called a *global mind-set*. It facilitates *global reach*.

Below is a composite sketch or simple listing of the many global attributes necessary to become a true leader in the international arena – be it in business, academics, science, practicing law, even politics and running for office back home. These are, in my opinion, non-negotiable prerequisites, no matter what your chosen career field might become over time. Each is unique, every one is vital to total success. Some are easy, while others are not. I have always wondered how politicians can govern, having never lived overseas.

Global Attributes

Inquisitiveness about life, work setting	Likes to take risks: in travel, living conditions
Adventurers-new elements, unpredictable	Eager to learn new ideas, untried work model
Language skills acquired, mastered	Enjoys lively discussion & debate, ideas
Culturally sensitive, patient-tolerant	Culturally adaptive, inviting change, respect
Restlessness, needs constant change	Works long hours, not even noticed
Easily bored, abhors regular routine	Work is their hobby – well sort of
Multi-tasking ability achieved	Not easily frustrated with "little things"
High value stream, limitless potential	See the glass half-full, not half-empty
Food tolerant, celebrates diversity	Diverse life experiences wholly invited
Physically fit, not travel fatigued easily	Knows their company-organization well
Humble in any setting, no alpha male	Trustworthy and ethical without deviation

Global Mindset Pitfalls and Hazards

Personal health and emotional well being	Personal safety and crime prevention
Family ties broken, temporary or permanent	Personality changes, values in conflict
Language & cultural misunderstandings	Living standards adjustments realized
Minimized ties to the home organization	Lost networking, new job opportunities
Difficulty accepting repatriation	Lack of empathy with previous peers
Alcohol abuse, especially in some nations	Drug abuse, lack of counseling, support
Sexual Peccadilloes, loneliness issues	Relationship confusion, identity crises
Career derailment, intended/seek change	Career derailment, unintended, no plans

As the reader can plainly see, the ascension to an international assignment is not for the faint of heart and cannot be undertaken by merely asking for it. Perhaps it's extended further so as to say that not everyone is capable of dealing with the myriad of situation-creating dilemmas as illustrated in the pair of lists immediately above. To the uninitiated reader, HR executive, senior level manager, or ambitious employee, none of these issues and concerns should be taken lightly, as even the best-of-the-best can succumb to being dealt a set of life-changing cards for which they are completely unprepared to administer appropriate controls and handling of the variety of unpredictable day-to-day occurrences.

There are what I like to refer to as four priorities for global executives; although we have undertaken several lists of qualifications, attributes, problems, and dangers facing everyone living and working abroad. The first is that of being 100% clear on what kinds of global executives with what kind of skills are needed from a strategic long-term point of view. The prudent use of experience as a teacher by providing relevant opportunities to those the organization is trying to develop is vital to preparations of people and their assignments abroad. A third need is to provide the appropriate levels of valued feedback, resources, and constant support to help people learn from the experiences they have had. And finally, a global mindset is revealed by giving people international perspectives and exposure, starting early on in one's career. Be it in the form of 2-3 week work-related trips abroad, meetings held on home soil involving staff members from other parts of the world, and/or simply training high-potential employees in cross-cultural exercises and briefings whenever the organization has such a forum being attended by other groups.

Changing the context of one's work, especially when crossing cultures but also when crossing businesses or functions, has almost inevitable results. Some are good, highly stimulating, and invigorating; some debilitating, frustrating, and even potentially career limiting. Other things being equal, how much difficulty people experience will depend on how different the new context is from the one they came from. People who have changed countries especially, but also those who have just changed jobs or domestic companies, will recognize the experience.

I submit to you yet another list, albeit an informative one, that exhibits what we call “changing contexts” within the framework of coming to grips with the sea of change we can expect when facing new work situations.

Things tend to take much longer in tasks	We have to work much harder to complete
Old ways simply won't work anymore	Nothing is simple, everything's complicated
We make mistakes and realize it	We make mistakes and don't realize it
We feel awkward, most of the time	Nobody understands us, or what we do
We have no credibility, no endorsement	We don't understand what we're being told
We have to think about everything	Nothing is automatic or a given
Everything is fuzziier, hard to decipher	Things don't make sense anymore, nothing

It is precisely the old mastering of career development capabilities that launches us into high-flying global career initiatives, all-the-while it is those same attributes and recognized talents that carry with them previous job “baggage” that promote and inhibit our career successes later on down the occupational road. Leadership issues are closely related to communication issues, of course, and in a variety of surveys, executives gave domestic versus global context examples as well as highlighting differences from one specific culture to another. A “commanding” style that may work in one culture won't work in others, as the sources of motivation may be different from one culture to another, and how the executive gets things done must be regularly monitored and adapted. If you are operating in a culture other than your own, it adds complexity and makes demands upon the leader who has to face them. Executive commentary that I have pursued for over thirty years clearly shows how they learned to cope, with many examples to better make the point at this time, in preparing this paper while providing beneficial insight.

Being open and honest, we hear all the time, however listening to what is out there in the global arena, as well as being an informed citizen, helps develop consensus thinking. It is always easier to motivate people locally by framing an external enemy and drawing on nationalism, an odd but equally necessary mixture to create a sense of urgency. The work, efficiencies, productivity metrics, and a host of other measurement disciplines are about the same. It is how you manage people to get the most out of them which is the difference and high-quality change agent. Corporate life in America is more hierarchical, no matter what has been written about leveling the pyramid or flattening the world, or quite possibly empowering what's left of a decimated workforce than that found in other countries. In Europe, you have to sell your ideas (but you can actually do that), whereas in Asia, you shut up and listen, being told what to do, similar to schooling learning styles and instructional methodologies in earlier classroom life.

Coping also mandates a firm grasp of the in-country's legal system, while not an expert yourself, the assignment recognizes that you don't know what the law is, what the business practices are, and pursuant to that fact, negotiations can be subtle and cloaked in legal boundaries and intimidations. Finding good legal counsel for your organization can often develop into conflicts with the home office, as their local law firm may not have representation in the host country to which you have been assigned. This should be both obvious and a prerequisite in particular if you are being asked to build the employee

population and also construct facilities; such as a factory, distribution center, laboratory, or sales office. As hard as it may be to believe, many foreign assignment employees fail to realize that business simply is not done the same way in other countries. You, as the newcomer to an overseas land, should not make judgments too early about anything, even if you have been advised by previous expatriate members of your team or sold on the notion that some home-state sponsorship and guidance by the U.S.-based state trade office is provided. That help is, more often than not, dubious advice by folks who have never been to your new-assignment country, and most certainly have never been in your shoes in any manner of speaking. They remain clueless, and I have seen it hundreds of times, in spite of being well intentioned people back home.

One of the other keys to successfully landing in the new overseas assignment is to fully understand the profound differences in customers and markets. One's perspective on managing risk, on people and cash, is influenced by whether it is a domestic or international posting. Especially in a domestic assignment, you likely have a network. You know the ministers, officials, and customers. Your network develops over time, and you feel comfortable in how to get things done. But building networks in another country, as a foreigner, is very difficult. One can twist arms perhaps, but cannot fight the battles that rage every day. The greater the business complexity (y-axis), and the larger the cultural complexity (x-axis), as you push outward from both of those zero-points on a grid, the more you develop a global mind-set. And it is an infinite move traveling in an outward direction of continuous growth and personal development, never ceasing.

Business Complexity derives from the number of functions which you will have to master: products, suppliers, organization units, locations, a diverse customer base, and even geography & travel, that make up the scope and scale of the business. Keep in mind that crossing borders of business is not enough by itself for a job to be truly global. The essential border crossing that makes a job global or international is crossing the **Border of Culture**. It is defined at its most basic level by geography, languages, traditions, and other divisions that relate to the differences among people and their habits.

Five Factors for Building an Effective Global Team

While there are many more than these 5 elements, they head the early-on tasks list. These are the result of numerous surveys conducted over the past two decades by people studying expatriate life and combined with my own personal overseas assignment priority rating system, that I developed through the use of a 1-10 numerical evaluation metrics rating scorecard. The results vary only slightly, and are not intended to translate into a concrete, absolute prioritization. This illustration is merely intended to give the reader here a brief glimpse into what constitutes the most important start-up criteria to get the ball rolling for a newcomer to a foreign assignment. Some of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th ratings below might be surprising to you, especially number 5, but please keep in mind that each of these ranked almost equally important, with minimal scoring differences, while the “next five” or secondary factors were far below this Top Five. These five are consistently ranked as the most critically important to the overall success of the foreign expat employee manager and the build-up of the foreign operation, with everything else

becoming distant second-tier needs. I always found number 5 here to be a surprise. I guess that I would have rated it number two in the degree of prioritization, as foreign colleagues must see the logic and the urgency in the company's mission, to exercise an appropriate level of buy-in, if the organization is to succeed relative to headquarters' strategic long-term management direction. Nevertheless, they are all important!

- (1) Cultivating trust among team members in the organization – rated the most important entry task, while also the most difficult to accomplish initially
- (2) Overcoming communication barriers – the second most difficult, 2nd in doing
- (3) Aligning goals of individual team members, as well as the entire team – rates in the middle, in terms of importance and the degree of difficulty in accomplishing
- (4) Ensuring that the entire team possesses necessary knowledge and work skills – usually much easier to accomplish, and oddly enough, rated much easier to do
- (5) Obtaining clarity regarding team objectives, company goals, the mission at hand – considered the most easy to perform and of less importance than the first four

What Is A Global Mind-Set?

Without a doubt, this is my favorite portion of this paper-essay-monologue. The question is simple enough, right? But the answer is extremely difficult to get your arms around conceptually and/or in reality. I should know, after two decades of overseas travel and foreign assignments. I have seen some pretty interesting slide presentations attempting to depict this concept, most without clarity and assembled by those who never actually lived overseas, or managed a foreign operation, in particular from the safety and security of the mother ship HQ back home. I have worked for senior level executives (CEO, COO, Senior VP, VP, Division GM, Group President) who have never lived outside of the United States and who, if you can possibly believe this, in some cases have not even left the same town where they grew up and went to high school. In one case, the CEO even went to college in his hometown, while another high level executive only left his hometown for the four years while attending to his university education. And that was in the same state where they grew up. And yet they tried to manage the needs and growth expectations of a Fortune 500 global manufacturing company, with over 60,000 employees scattered across the globe in over 80 countries! Working with them as I did, dining with them, traveling with them, watching them in meetings, I saw an unfortunate degree of global mind-set ignorance, cultural arrogance, and home-grown stupidity. Sad to say, there is no nice way to put it, try as I might. Anything that resembled cultural sensitivity, foreign language competency, or even a remote grasp of other nations' historical roots was totally non-existent. In a few cases, my "superiors" were older than me, with Vietnam Veteran lineages, which I respect and admire. However, their Asian phobia was a debilitating professional hindrance on moving forward with life along with being able to work comfortably anywhere in the Asia-Pacific hemisphere. And as we all know, if you are going to be a member of the business community, political machine, scientific or medical profession, or just about anything else to earn a living, then you must come to grips with Asia's 21st-century prominence, like it or not. So, with that said, it's back to factors that build a global mind-set.

Are you open to diversity across cultures and foreign markets? Do you try to develop knowledge and capabilities about diversity across cultures and markets? Are you able to integrate diversity across cultures and markets? Heck, do you even bother reading the local English-language newspapers and magazines, expatriate living/lifestyles periodicals or join local organizations (even a local fitness club) that cater to foreign assignment expatriates? Even better is to join an almost-entirely-locally-populated organization. Answer all of these “yes,” and you are on your way to becoming a professional equipped with a global mind-set. If the answer to any one of these remains a solid “no,” then you have lingering issues that need attention as quickly as possible. The proverbial bottom line is that you will be much better situated to take on the foreign assignment task having the ability to respond in the affirmative to the queries above, and will have a whole lot more fun building your international career and (hopefully) future promotion prospects.

As we embrace all of this and delve into slightly more theoretical or larger thinking components of globalization and developing a global mind-set, let’s take a look at factors that must evolve as part of the international manager’s package of annual strategic planning notes. Each is likely to become fully incorporated into their presentations back home at company-organizational headquarters, whenever they are summoned (I like to call it that, having been a victim/participant in such pilgrimages to HQ on a semi-annual basis.) to cow-tow to the senior management within the mother ship. I love that term, sorry. And so we pursue a manager’s guide to action, or whatever you chose to call it.

Going Global

What are the globalization imperatives for the company, for the industry, and for your home country? Do you have a full command of these directives and the overall agenda? Decisions must be made on the choice of products to be sold overseas, to be designed locally, perhaps even manufactured to localized standards – or to your own company’s global corporate engineering standards. Product localization is more of a challenge that most realize. The choices of strategic markets drive product decisions. People who will be assigned overseas or expected to become globe-trotting project managers constantly meet up with foreign staff members to represent the interests of each division, R&D, HQ, overseas trading subsidiaries, foreign manufacturing facilities, and overseas vendors. The foreign competition or domestic competition (also heading overseas...) will further dictate decisions relative to choices of strategic markets. Equally important will become the choice of entry mode: localized production, import/export, foreign R&D, acquisition.

Then we come to another of my favorites, namely transplanting the corporate DNA as it is commonly called – maybe the company culture, if there is a strong one – or ethics standards of conduct and personnel development initiatives. Marketing is another one. Winning the local battle has many fronts, quite possibly too many for the context of this paper’s delivery. This battle is constructed around a myriad of factors. From hiring the best talent that can be found, developing and retaining them, motivating and promoting them, all become essential to stability over the long haul in any organizational chart.

There are decidedly local conflicts with competitors, the local media, governments, even outsourced help in services and vendor audits, supplier agreements and your facility's management. The speed of local expansion has killed many companies coming overseas, by either being too slow or too fast to respond to virtually everything thus far covered within the confines of this piece of web information. Reckless speed kills, as does being excruciatingly slow to recognize opportunities and challenges in new markets. We shall discuss that in greater detail in another installment of this essay work.

Earlier on in this paper, we began to look at the hazards of the foreign assignment. We tried to briefly sketch out the prerequisites for becoming global, personally as well as professionally. Within the company walls and also on the outside as "one of them," on the outside looking in, no longer tucked comfortably within the inner circle socially or from an occupational-political standpoint, no longer privy to company gossip or the divisional holiday party, not even a regular participant in cube-farm bantering and cafeteria information gathering. Going overseas means uncertainty. You lay it all on the line professionally. There is, as we already realize, uncertainty in your new home in a foreign land, while uncertainty continues to be your friend-foe/ally-nemesis in trying to still develop a plan for staying employed in the organization, eventually returning home to bigger and better opportunities back home, fully repatriated – a question mark always.

Even if and when you master the new foreign language (wishful thinking maybe), the ever-present culture shock is never far away, no matter what anyone says or how hard they try to convince you, it never fully retreats. I have lived in foreign countries for over half of my 30-year adult career, including mainland China, and even in a cosmopolitan enclave such as Shanghai, having been successful in nurturing Mandarin Chinese language skills, I shall forever be a foreigner. Period. There's no sugar coating it my friends. It is no one's fault, it comes with the territory. Excited and energized as I might be when arriving at the airport in Pu Dong (far-suburban Shanghai), and as much as I try to call it "home," it is not where I was raised, attended school, or anything else. But in spite of all of those early-on life memories, one can still find success and happiness there, just like anyplace else. If you set your mind to it in a positive manner, get acclimated as soon as possible, and have the employer sponsorship-endorsement-support along with a great team of colleagues, then it is much easier to foster a rapid global mind-set. Pre-trip training and indoctrination by a qualified firm or support group makes it easier and faster. Unfortunately, I did not know China's (or its relationship with Taiwan) history in any detail. The concept of "saving face," while a natural component of my personality, was really untried and untested – again not at all grasped – as I began to work in Asia. Most of what I learned was by making mistakes as well as reading, discussing things with those colleagues that I came to trust during casual conversations, and keeping my eyes and ears wide open. Also by watching visitors, customers, management miscues, company insider politics, and buying educational tapes and CDs on history, culture, anything I could find.

There is, however, more good news when evaluating all of this. Among the good is still the fact that with this kind of assignment, the individual can enjoy quantum leaps in autonomy and breadth of responsibility. Not to mention the opportunity to recover from mistakes virtually unnoticed. After all, most of the time management back home has no

idea what's going over in your assignment. And in many cases they perhaps remain too preoccupied to watch much more than their favorite people in their favorite countries, in their old manufacturing or divisional operations from which they grew up professionally. It is hard to keep one's eye on the ball in distant lands, in distant unfamiliar operations, among unfamiliar employees, especially with significant time zone changes and the language problems. We all have our favorite projects, our favorite products to sell, our mentors in-house, our favorite customers, our favorite colleagues, our favorite travel destinations and business unit operations. If going to Asia or China, for example, is not your boss's comfort zone (as was the case with me), then you are left entirely alone to get thing done. That's the positive spin on things. But when he does decide to make a trip across the Pacific Ocean, and then sleep through important meetings due to a toxic mix of jet-lag, cigarettes, booze, and indifference – well, by golly you do what you can to make him feel welcomed and comfortable, informed and enlightened – and get him out of Asia. I recall another evening dinner incident when one staffer from U.S. headquarters was woefully bemoaning the fact that his *Asian Experience* “road trip” was in its 9th day, with one more day to go, prior to heading home to America. Meanwhile many of us had been in Asia either as expatriates or were on – in my specific case, in the midst of week eleven of an extended trip overseas – before finally being sent permanently overseas to live ay a later date. Those of us who witness this behavior can only shrug our shoulders, and grin.

The downside involves when you risk (and it does happen, make no mistake) losing networks. That's when it becomes imperative that you pick the phone or e-mail a note, asking for technical assistance or training support from trusted colleagues back at the ranch, put them on a plane and let them see what you are doing. It promotes team unity and awareness that they are not alone overseas, allows others back home to actually see first hand what you do in your new assignment, and gives you “sponsorship” once again back in home operations, so that you are not forgotten. And it helps build the business overseas – the exact thing that sent you into this no-man's-land in the first place! Your work has to be understood, not only by the local members of your team, but also by everyone back home. Not just as a vehicle to stay in touch or eventually return with promotion in hand, but to actually accomplish something in the new assignment.

Any global position differs greatly from any other job in the degree to which a person is required to properly manage relations between the company, the governments, and the multiple societies with whom interaction becomes an everyday occurrence. In many locations worldwide, dealing with high-level government officials and influential members of the host society again brings both rewards and risks, but is a requirement, not typically understood by company HQ staff. I always took 6-8 colleagues of my Asia-Pacific team on a month long tour of North American or European (alternating continents every year) manufacturing-sales-R&D operations annually to provide them with a meet-and-greet opportunity among non-Asian employees and even customers. They all felt a sense of pride at being invited on such excursions, learned a lot about other company operation and market-entry methods, local politics and news, and it gave us in Asia more “buy-in” from both HQ and far-flung international employees, who then visited us in Asia to offer training and badly needed sales support. If one word can be used to sum up what being thrust into an overseas assignment is all about, it should surely be the word

ambiguity. This is at its core, the fundamental difference between a domestic and an overseas job.

Clear-cut lines of authority and ever-present power struggles, especially in places like China, are a constant. When you have tyrannical, insecure guys from Hong Kong, laying false claim to their Mainland Chinese heritage (H.K. is referred to in Mainland China as “China Light,” not the real China) and incessantly manipulating others to gain a foothold, undoing and undermining the Shanghai-based general manager’s role, then you find that your job description lacks this item of conflict resolution. What do you then do? I found that politics in Asian business circles far exceeded anything I had even seen in America. And I saw the worst of it throughout North America, or so I thought. Korea has a strange rampant nationalism that rivals France, including reluctance to use their already well practiced English language skills. A stubbornness and unwillingness to do things other than their way remains the norm, to the point of ignoring corporate engineering rules. Japan, while a wonderful country that I admire, has its continuing lack of transparency for its troubled war history, continuing business isolation at times, and condescension. Asian humility is compromised with a newfound sense of pride and out-of-control corruption. But there is still the sense of awakening pride and lost dignity surfacing. And that is a good thing. But inter-cultural programs usually don’t know how to address many of these issues. And your boss hasn’t any idea – and hates karaoke bonding nights.

With any notion of workplace uncertainty or job ambiguity comes the irrefutable fact that a significant portion of this stressful existence can be found in yet another listing dutifully submitted to succinctly illustrate the variety of concerns which have origins in the confines of cultural differences. This collection of 18 divergent thought mechanisms deliver additional insight into why everything is ambiguous, why HQ doesn’t understand. Most of what we learn overseas is difficult to teach, as it is lived and experienced. But having lived and worked in an overseas assignment gives rise to empathy at the very least, in both management supervisors and between culturally diverse team members.

Laws, business practices, local protocols	Actions, behaviors, habits
Language, meanings, actions, body language	Food, transportation, local rules
Pace (faster or slower) – daily, monthly, annual	Decision-making processes
Frame of reference, connections	Problem-solving approaches
Levers of change, timing of change, opportunities	Leadership practices
Motivations, values, social & work contract	Interpersonal styles
Politics, social patterns, protocol (direct/implied)	Time frames (long vs. short view)
Social, & work overlaps – acceptable boundaries	Titles, authority distinctions
Business drivers – strategic, accidental, local	Physical offices & facilities spaces

Global Leader Competencies

Open-minded and flexible in thought and tactics: The person must be able to live and work in a variety of settings with different types of people and is willing and able to

listen to other people, approaches, and ideas. THIS IS THE SINGLE LARGEST LACK OF CAPABILITY AND SELF-IMPOSED DISCIPLINE IN THE TYPICAL ALPHA MALE/ALPHA FEMALE AMERICAN SENIOR EXECUTIVE, ESPECIALLY WHEN COMMUNICATING WITH FOREIGN PERSONNEL AND EVEN CUSTOMERS!!

Cultural interest and sensitivity: The person respects other cultures, people, and points of view; is not arrogant or judgmental, and remains curious about other people and how they live and work. They are interested in differences, while enjoying social competency, and are able – even enthusiastic – about getting along well with others, and is empathetic. THIS CONTINUES TO BE THE OTHER – THE SECOND MOST COMMON AND REPORTED FLAW IN THE WESTERN-FOREIGN EXECUTIVE, WITH ONLY A FEW EXCEPTIONS!! Frankly, I believe that most executives are fearful of social and even a business setting embarrassment, something to which they are not accustomed.

Able to deal with complexity: The person once again considers many variables in solving a problem; is comfortable with ambiguity (easier said than done) and patient in evolving issues. They can make decisions in the face of uncertainty and can see patterns and connections, all-the-while focused and willing to take risks. And they're “dialed into” local office politics, insider dealings, market dynamics, the prevailing issues back home.

Resilient, resourceful, optimistic, and energetic: This individual responds to a challenge and is in no way discouraged by adversity. They continue to be self-reliant and creative, seeing the positive side of things, enabled with a high measure of physical & emotional energy – always able to deal with stress – as I said, repeatedly, easier & taught than done.

Honest and full of integrity: Authentic, consistent, the person engenders trust, and a loyal following. Admired, even envied by folks back at the home-country operations.

Stable personal life: Often times the most difficult of all, given everything that we have talked about here in this essay. Many things surface to trip up even the best relationships. The person has developed and maintains stress-resistant personal arrangements, usually family, that support a commitment to work and overseas living. Being an expatriate is definitely harder on the trailing spouse and children than it is on the overseas employee.

Value-added technical or business skills: The person may have great language skills derived from say, a Peace Corps assignment, or having traveled as a foreign diplomat's kid many, many years ago. Perhaps they know a few local people, here and there. But this person absolutely must have the technical, managerial, industry experience, and other relevant expertise to be sufficiently prepared to represent their company or organization and achieve the necessary maximum credibility. Many inter-cultural and business management consultants are seriously lacking in this area. They speak the language – and that's a big maybe – but have nothing else to offer the client or the global team to which they have been assigned.

As we begin to wind down this effort at explaining the global mind-set and the foreign assignment manager, let's be forever thoughtful in thinking through other characteristics, both internal and external, that can make or break their new career adventure. Be careful.

- How narrow and parochial a culture is, versus how worldly – we are all different
- How direct and open a culture is in its communication and sharing of information, versus how closed and subtle – throughout Asia, this becomes a consideration
- The importance of saving face, what it means to treat people with respect, and how trust is developed – while it may come naturally, one must always abide by it
- The value placed upon close personal relationships as a way of doing business, as opposed to the value placed on more formal (and distant) attitudes
- What motivates people, including the perceived value of money and respect, as reflected in status, position, and hierarchy – Asia is quickly re-discovering this
- Work ethic, entrepreneurialism, sensitivity to the customer, action orientation, and the like – once again, all of Asia-Pacific is formulating new integrity attitudes
- Mental models, ways of thinking, and patterns of logic – Asia is so different!
- Expectations of how a leader should act
- The state of the economy (e.g. inflation, instability), social organization, and political processes – The Great Recession of 2008-2009 gives pause to reflect
- Historical underpinnings of attitudes and stereotypes, for example the relationship between the Germans and the French, or the Japanese and Koreans, Chinese

Conclusion

Every lesson has certain “take-away” morsels of insight and points worth being remembered. They can be condensed and neatly placed into segments with small titles to provide comfort – and recollection – for the newly informed reader. At least I hope so.

The first lesson envisions learning to lead & manage others. Simply put, it requires careful selection, development, motivation, and team building support with the candidate. They learn to establish credibility early on in their career and into their first assignment of consequence. The right person with that so-called “right stuff” is always a puzzle, and most of the time is only figured out after an assignment is awarded, and the employee is put into tough situations. They can be evaluated by learning to build and sustain an effective team, usually learned by example from those in charge of their early careers. They quickly learn to make the difficult calls about people, again a learned behavior. They learn to stay focused, keeping things simple, setting clear goals for themselves and for others. They are constantly on the lookout for, and learning, how to keep people motivated and committed, what to delegate and what not to delegate building up an overseas operation. And finally, they learn to foster people empowerment-development and the importance of developing people within their comfort zones, and outside of them.

In dealing with problematic relationships, one must ascertain the nucleus of those troubled areas of concern. Among the primary problem relationships will most definitely

involve company headquarters – it always does. One’s bosses, unions maybe, multiple governments (state, local, provincial, national), the news hungry media, politics of both internal and external forces all come readily to mind. You learn to handle immediate supervisors and other upper-level management tactfully – always the internal diplomat. Learning how to manage the HQ interface function is required, and forever disliked. As a global pathfinder, executive, even as an entrepreneur, the public appearances and the media remain on the prowl and one needs to professionally respond. Learning to deal with governments and external politicians also demands a certain amount of time. As mentioned above, the union dilemma can and will place unexpected allocations on time consumption on the table, in particular where union positions are recalcitrant and not aligned with one’s home nation thinking, historical negotiation proceedings, or even disruptive political tendencies tied to their organizational power structure. Know-how in both internal company and external government-union politics is a must, no matter how distasteful and acutely time-wasting we think it might be. It goes with the territory.

Our final learning theme, as we might chose to refer to it, is the core of our pursuit of knowledge. We take a last look at recalling the personal qualities of a global leader. I said, “leader” as opposed to “tactical manager,” and with the utmost of emphasis, as the distinction between the two is enormous, a void as large as the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

Global leaders listen carefully, learn to ask questions, and to see the world through other people’s eyes (not just Cleveland, Ohio as I quickly learned in my own career). You learn to be open and honest, fair, to treat other people with respect and truly willing to trust others. The genuine leader carefully hones his/her skills in learning to become flexible, to adapt to changing situations, to take changing-and-evolving circumstances into account, while managing multiple priorities and ultra-complex relationships, while thinking on their feet. This individual learns to assess and take calculated risks, and to act in the face of uncertainty – and grasp that the media (or Wall Street) will not get it. The ideal global leader, as we shall endeavor to call them from now on, learns to persevere, to act with discipline, and to stay calm under tough circumstances, even as HQ tries to grow armchair quarterbacking constraints – calmness under fire becomes an almost instinctive personality trait.

With that, we share this close by saying that everything written on these pages involves learning to be optimistic, to believe in oneself, to trust one’s instincts, to take a stand for what you believe is right, and to accept responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions. In the final analysis, the rewards include becoming more cosmopolitan, with a broader perspective, a profile further encompassing a more balanced and decidedly tolerant view of people and the world at large. Your credentials become a composition of valuing other people more highly, attaining a more sociable demeanor, and clearly more knowledgeable in a variety of subjects and most definitely understanding yourself, others. You become tougher, that’s for sure. You are more focused and wiser. Self-confidence becomes the norm, with an overall healthy dose of knowing more of who you are, what you are made of, what you can do and achieve, if left to your own values and skill-sets.

Most of the time, it only takes a little bit of help from someone who has been here, done that. Or it might be taken simply as a listening ear and sage advice from a friend.

The Expatriate Experience – Graphic of Collected Data

The graph below is an illustration of just how different, and substantial, the overseas living adventure can become. Over 500 people were surveyed in detail from the time period of June 2000, through September 2008, to develop this assessment illustration.

Lessons of Global Executives: Where their Lessons Were Learned

