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International Assignment: The Unexpected Turn in Life

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My landing of an international assignment in Zurich when I was based in Toronto was like one of those wrong turns that took you to a part of town you never knew existed. I had just joined the company not that long before, had never thought about working in Europe and didn't speak any European languages other than English very well.

What happened four years ago seems like only yesterday. It was an early Monday morning on a hot and humid Toronto summer day. I had just moved from Quebec City to Toronto a few months before to start a new job. I was excited about my new job, moving to a new city and building a career in a reputable company. I arrived early that morning so I could delve into my study manual in peace before my colleagues started arriving. Not long after, my boss at the time passed by my desk and said "Good morning." He continued walking a few steps before retracing back his steps and asked, "Are you interested in going to Zurich?" I smiled and said "Yes." I didn't ask what, when, why, who and how, nor did I start analyzing this proposal in any logical manner. I knew that he was a manager who wanted the best for me, and for me that was enough to say "yes." It is funny how adventurous my younger self was and how that naïve and simple *yes* drastically changed the course of my next few years.

I did not prepare myself very well for the move to Switzerland and for Switzerland itself. Perhaps you have the image in your mind that an international assignee is someone who would simply need to show up at the airport, take the flight, land in a foreign country and be moved into a furnished apartment with all necessities of life dealt with by his or her company? Yes and no. Most companies try to do what they can to support international assignees. For example, most likely your company will provide you with temporary housing for a short time and engage a relocation company to help you with things such as work permit, opening a bank account and finding permanent accommodation. The truth is that the cost pressure faced by many firms nowadays means the much coveted *expat package* is given much less often and the standard *international package* is now much lighter, so more is left in your own hands. Even with

company support, being educated about residency, work permit, taxation, social security, repatriation and such things can prevent you from being blindsided by the unexpected. The impact of an international assignment on your personal and professional situations can go beyond the duration of the assignment, and that is something no one other than you can best plan for.

In today's global economy, understanding the ways of the world is a key competitive advantage for both employees and companies. Embarking on an international assignment is one way to enrich your personal and professional experience. I was fortunate enough to have been exposed to two very different cultures at a young age due to my Chinese roots and Canadian upbringing. Adding the European exposure has definitely helped me see the world with a clearer lens. I also arrived at a very interesting, albeit challenging, time for Europe: the Greek debt crisis, Switzerland's referendum to limit foreign workers, the unpegging of the Swiss franc to the euro, the migrant crisis and Brexit—just to name a few. These events have helped me learn more about Europe as it was in the past, as it is today and as it will be in the future.



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An international assignment also comes with its own challenges. During my two and a half years as an international assignee in Switzerland, I always dreaded the August to October months because that was when I had to submit my annual work permit renewal application. To give a bit of background, Switzerland has one of the highest proportions of foreigners at 24.6 percent, but it also has some of the toughest immigration regulations. The recent economic turmoil faced by many European countries and the relative stability in Switzerland has made it an attractive place for many Europeans to seek work. Shortly before I arrived in Switzerland toward the end of 2014, the Swiss voted “against mass immigration.” As a consequence, the quota for work permits decreased. Switzerland has a somewhat unusual relationship with the EU in that it is not part of it, but it has many bilateral agreements with the EU. The result is it has some autonomy in deciding its immigration policy, but the EU, being Switzerland’s largest trade partner, also has significant negotiating power.

So how did this affect me? As a non-EU foreign worker, I am entitled only to a yearly renewable work permit (versus the less limited five-year work permits granted to some EU citizens), and my company must prove that they could not find a suitable person first in Switzerland, and then in the EU, to hire me. The process is very cumbersome and requires a lengthy process and heavy paperwork. At my first renewal, due to some holdup, I received my new work permit after the expiry of my old permit. I panicked and was planning for the worst in case I would have to pack and leave with less than two weeks’ notice. At my second renewal, learning from my prior experience, I did the research myself and found out that I was most likely going to be denied a work permit. So, this time I thought I also had to prepare to leave the country with two months’ notice. Fortunately, things did work out in the end, thanks in large to the support of my manager and in-house personnel.

International assignments are, by definition, limited term. So what happens afterward? Some companies have a detail road map for what you would do after when they send you away and others do not. My assignment lasted two and a half years. This was enough time for many things to change—my career aspirations, personal situation and the organization. In the end, I left the firm where I started as an actuarial student and ended as a fellow. The journey has taught me what it means to be a good actuary who understands the business and the people in the business.

So how do you get an international posting opportunity should you be interested? I think the answer varies depending on your seniority, where you want to be sent, your company’s strategies and many other factors. The reasons companies send someone to an emerging market versus a developed market are quite different. Basing my advice on anecdotal observations in Zurich, most international assignees I met were working for a company with a sizeable operation in Zurich and in their home country. I also knew a few who seized the opportunity to state their interest in an international posting to their manager, internal network or colleagues working in other locations. This eventually led to an opportunity they wanted. As for myself, the skills I gained in Toronto happened to be in demand in another project in Zurich, so getting involved in projects with international exposure and accumulating transferrable skills definitely do help.

So if I were to offer some advice to any young actuarial students, it would be to take time out of your busy study schedule and set career goals not solely about passing exams or attaining fellowship. In the short term, these are very important goals, but the weight of your career post-qualification is much heavier (hopefully). I would encourage you to treat the exam process as an intermediate, albeit significant, part of your actuarial training. Many more fulfilling experiences are waiting for you after you qualify. ■



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