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Taking Your Talents Abroad

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Editor's Note: The following article is based on a presentation made by the author at the January 2004 ASNA conference in Toronto.

In September 2003, I completed an 18-month secondment to the United Kingdom. My experience prompted me to accept an invitation to present my views on working internationally, from the point of view of a student.

In this article, I suggest reasons for considering an international posting. There are many pluses and minuses to working abroad, and many lessons to learn. An overseas assignment brings specific skills or acumen to an individual, which a current or potential employer will find valuable.

Why Consider an International Posting?

On a personal level, there is the increased independence as well as the adventure. But let's consider reasons from a work standpoint. Globalization is taking hold. To remain competitive, companies need to expand, and to do so means going outside home borders. International postings are also a form of diversification—greater choice of jobs and working environments. It could mean an increased chance of finding a job. It could also offer a level of job security. With a corporation making an investment by sending you overseas, they want to see a return on that investment.

Views on Working Internationally

On the positive side is the further exposure to people and industry. Just by being out there one can't avoid exposure. Therefore, you're noticed,

but realize that you're also an ambassador for your home country, company and department. I found this continued into my current situation. After my work in the United Kingdom was completed, I was still considered as a resource to be tapped, and that consideration extends to my current colleagues as well.

Other pluses include:

- **Real experience** – Despite increases in global communications, video conferencing, e-mails and better phone lines, nothing beats actually being there.
- **Increased knowledge** – A fresher look at the same thing, or getting to dip your elbows into something new. In either case, the learning curve is more enjoyable.
- **Increased confidence** – Dealing with different situations, some of which might not be possible back home, and having to deal with a lot of it on your own. You won't necessarily have friends and colleagues to back you up.
- **Increased network** – As part of an informal group of other non-resident residents, forging ties with other actuaries and non-actuaries alike.

For a balanced view, one must acknowledge the minuses. You have to put your local life on hold, including perhaps exams (depending on where you locate). But I like to think I've gained in other ways. If I found myself looking at things the same way after being overseas for two years, I would consider those two years as wasted.

There are the unavoidable hassles of work visas and permits, and it only gets more complicated when trying to extend the original terms later on (which is more likely to happen than not).

It is remarkable how different tax regimes operate, even in very simple ways. Given two different fiscal tax years, any overlap can create tax effects for each jurisdiction. These can play off each other and you might find yourself dealing with foreign filings for a couple of years after you've returned. A tax advisor can be indispensable.

Consider the numerous health issues, from preparations to depart (vaccinations, insurance), considerations during one's stay (one visit back to Toronto during the SARS outbreak prohibited me from entering the

office), to consequences after returning (a length of stay in the United Kingdom can exclude you from donating blood).

Don't forget the actual move. The physical move was handled by professionals, but preparations before each move were tiresome, and nearly impossible those few evenings before leaving, when everyone wants to see you "one last time." Overall, I found the move out, for a temporary stay, easier than the final move back.

Travel counts as both a plus (vacations, weekends) and a minus. Airports are not my favorite place (more of a workout than a rest); and I do not like being cooped up in an aircraft longer than necessary, but if you travel a lot for business, you could find yourself spending 40 percent of your time in an aircraft, and not all of it in the skies.

There is also the culture change. Although best viewed as a positive, it becomes interesting when the unexpected differences appear. Like waiting for the bus that has decided on a different route that morning, or the shop that has closed because the local team is playing. Sometimes the shock goes the other way. All the things you end up growing accustomed to are not here when you get back. For example, dependable rail service, local radio broadcasts, quality of news broadcasts, greater selection of music CDs, the local off-license, favorite restaurants, to name a few.

So what lessons have I learned? That nothing beats physically being there. That everybody's the same, everybody's competent and everybody's more or less trying to achieve the same goals, no matter where you go. That many of the same problems still exist; they just look different.

What it Adds to Home Experience

You will find that several of your individual capabilities have been enhanced.

Confidence – You begin by taking home knowledge gained abroad, and that expertise flows into your local work. You build trust with your new colleagues, they increasingly rely on you and that does a lot for your confidence.

- Specific and general knowledge – Whether it be a different software package, local financial standards, or overall company procedures, this allows you to become a central resource, sometimes the local phone directory, sometimes the senior liaison officer.
- Further human contact and exposure— Putting names to faces within the organization. People approaching you with questions: Who's the ALM guru over there? When does so and so leave for the day? How should I go about doing...? What's your opinion on...?

In summary, I hope that I've presented some views that will encourage readers to work abroad, and at the same time provide helpful advice to make it a successful and enjoyable experience. □



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All of these pension funds show an actuarial deficit, based on the last actuarial valuation in 1997.

4. Private Retirement Saving Funds

Private retirement savings funds are governed by internal contracts and do not benefit from the legislation. They are not a true pension fund but more an obligatory savings account. Out of all employers, only banks usually offer a retirement savings fund which is administered by the human resources department.

Contributions vary between 8 and 12 percent of salary and are paid by employee and employer in equal proportions. Until 2000, many banks had an agreement with ONA to reduce contributions to ONA (which is compulsory); now ONA

states all employers pay the mandatory contributions to the fund.

All contributions are converted into USD and invested in an individual savings account where the interest rate is the highest paid on time-deposits at the bank. The return is around 6 to 7 percent per annum.

At retirement age or earlier cessation of work, the contributions are paid back to the member with accumulated interest: 100 percent employees' portion and a certain percentage of the employer's portion depending on the number of years of service.

In 2000, there were 57,000 subscribers with more than half a billion Haitian Gourdes of accumulated contributions (\$23 million USD). □



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