

WORKING ABROAD CAN SERIOUSLY DAMAGE YOUR CAREER

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The problem

You are picked for a foreign assignment because you are a high flier. You are totally efficient. You get results. Beware: people like you can be totally deskilled in a different environment. The hard truth is that most high fliers fail when they go abroad. They get achieve nothing, or take two years to get things moving. You cannot afford to go abroad without training in how to operate and survive there.

The big opportunities are not in Benidorm or in the Greek islands; they were in Russia, Romania, Indonesia, Nigeria, and they are now in Iraq and Afghanistan. You will not be dealing with Western Europeans in a country with a western infrastructure.

The first shock is the lack of communication. How do you operate without even a telephone. It can take three days to get a telephone call home from Siberia - which is a particularly good business opportunity. Romania had only two telephone lines to the West

in 1990. Internal communication is equally bad - the poor communication between the states of the USSR prevented plotting, but it also caused the lack of integration which led to the breakup. The telephone lines are seldom fit for electronic data transmission. A lot of money is being spent on this, but it will be years before they catch up with Africa or Asia, much less Western Europe.

The next shock is the absence of everything that appears miraculously on your desk at home: pens, papers, files. Indeed, you have start working without an office, using your hotel bedroom. Renting an office and a flat takes time, and some under the counter deals in a country where all housing belongs to the state, and there is a desperate shortage of housing.

Buying a desk, chair, photocopier, fax and computer may be impossible: there are none in the shops. You have to find out how to import them, and how to keep them operating when there is no local agent.

You are brilliant with computers, and get the best out of management information systems and the Internet. However, computers are new in Eastern Europe. Until 1992 all the Russian oil exploration calculations were done by abacus. Elsewhere computers may be available but they may not work. In Sierra Leone, our office only had electricity for one afternoon in six months. I did import a UPS (a combination of battery and voltage stabilizer) to protect my computer from an unstable current, but a power surge blew up the UPS.

You need money to live on and to buy equipment. You will not get money in by telegraphic transfer: a three week delay is more common. In countries which are just building up a capitalist banking system even this may not work, and you have to get

someone to bring in \$100 bills, even though it is technically illegal. Most of Eastern Europe will change dollars more or less legally, as long as the notes are recent and in mint condition. You will have great difficulty in changing travellers' cheques outside the capital cities. As a law-abiding citizen you will be shocked to find that the only way you can manage is to use the black market.

Your personal reputation is based on your knowledge of the latest manufacturing technology. This is wasted when you are working in Albania, where they are using machinery bought second-hand from Russia in 1923, and where modernizing may mean buying second-hand production lines from the West. In Russia you will find that much of what you would like to do is impossible, for reasons like their backwardness in plastics.

Your knowledge of the British market, which is the basis for your past success, is a handicap abroad. The consumers in Bulgaria, India or Japan have different tastes and incomes. The marketing channels and retail outlets are quite different. Often marketing is through informal channels bypassing the remaining state-owned shops.

The networks you have built up here cannot help you. You have to build up new networks in a matter of weeks, using an interpreter. This is particularly hard in a country whose economy is changing rapidly, with the Mafia controlling large chunks of it. The Arthur Daleys are key contacts.

You are on your own. You do not have the support of a management information system, a computer technician, accounting staff, experienced managers, procurement officers, lab technicians etc. Success or failure depends on you alone.

You may have landed in one of the Eastern European countries where there is still no legal basis for trade and commerce, and there is no tradition of trading ethics, which are more powerful than laws in most countries. In this environment many local

businesspeople will try and cheat you. Equally serious, in this environment most British businesspeople lose their ethics, and local businesses are afraid of being cheated by anyone British. In one of the richest oblasts in Russia, the oblast government banned all British companies because they felt that one of the smaller British companies had cheated them.

Elsewhere in the world there is a local code of ethics, of honour in transactions and of obligations. The code is quite different to the one you know. For example you may think after a meeting that you have a firm contract, when they thought you were just describing your product.

The easy charm which made you the most successful salesperson in your company may jar on people used to a rigid bureaucratic system, or people who always go through a formal getting to know you procedure before doing business. There are many small ways you can irritate people: it is not just offering beef to a Hindu or eating with your left hand.

The people you work with may have been told all their lives that Britain was only waiting for the chance to nuke them. Russians had to do weekly air raid drills, and many of their factories and offices still have the directions to the bomb shelter clearly marked. Ex colonies also have constant propaganda showing that their current economic failures are because of British exploitation. It is not easy to suddenly drop a hate - look at the sub current of anti-German feeling in England 50 years after the war. In Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia the hate is reinforced by the fact that your daily hotel bill at the Hilton is six times their GM's monthly salary. In one West African country the British bank manager's salary came to half the total payroll for the biggest bank in the country. Graduates were being paid £ 60 per year. Yes, they resent it. Wouldn't you?

Most of your knowledge of how to work in Britain is subconscious. You know how to

work the system but not how the system works. It is very difficult to admit to yourself that you know nothing, then start to learn about the new system.

The solution

It is possible to succeed. Some people operate in foreign countries and make an enormous success of it. They then return home having established themselves as successful high fliers.

We give a course on survival techniques for people working abroad. The course was developed by people who have worked in dozens of countries worldwide over decades.

They have experienced the easiest and most difficult situations. They have met most of the problems you are likely to meet, and they have solved them.

Their country experience includes over 35 countries in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.

The course takes three days, from Friday night to Monday night. Courses will be held in cities in different parts of the country. It covers:

Working without an office and without backup.

Communications

Culture shock

Working with local employees

Using an interpreter

Networks

Finding the decision maker: hierarchical structures in a strange country

Business ethics

Currency and the black market

Checklists on tax, what to do with your house, what to pack, etc.

How not to die

How to stay sane

Surviving travel

Surviving hotels

Surviving recreation