



International Jobs, Part 2

By Sara Tusek

In the February 2011 issue of *Careers*, we examined what's needed to get your first job abroad. Legalities, competition and culture shock were covered in that issue.

This time we'll look at two areas of career development that go beyond simply getting a foothold in working abroad.

Key job skills for working abroad

Job skills fall into two broad categories: **job-specific and transferable.**

Job-specific skills include serving in a restaurant, operating heavy machinery, playing the violin, speaking a language, cleaning teeth, landscape gardening, preparing food, bookkeeping, and counting money.

Often, these are the skills used at jobs in the lower end of the pay scale; they are the skills you learn on-the-job or at a technical or professional school. Job-specific skills that are the exceptions to the low-pay-scale are professional jobs such as dentistry, computer programming, website development, designing roads and bridges, or accounting.

You can recognize job-specific skills by two characteristics: they are taught through technical training programs rather than a liberal arts education, and they must be constantly updated, as they change over time.

Transferable skills, on the other hand, are good for the entire length of your career. These skills are developed through use, becoming stronger as you adapt to new experiences. They tend to be grouped into clusters, for example

sales, management, organizational, interpersonal communications, writing, and leadership. Each skill cluster can be broken up (e.g., leadership skills include listening, inspiring, conveying a vision, caring, and compassion).

A liberal arts education, which is broad and multi-faceted, gives you transferable skills by helping you see connections between disciplines, by demanding that you develop decent writing and communication skills, and by making you aware of the scope of human history, scientific achievements and culture.



Prague: Emauz Church in springtime

As you might imagine, the transferable skills are much harder to "sell" than the job-specific skills. Employers want to hire people who can immediately enhance their organization's profitability, who can "hit the ground running" without extensive training.

Especially for jobs in the open market (employment ads, signs in the window saying "help wanted"), you need strong job-specific skills. To prepare for getting your first job in a foreign country, you may want to develop some readily-saleable skills that will catch the eye of the employer.

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March 2011
Volume 11, Number 3

Building an international career

By now, you know that getting your first job in a foreign country calls for you to spend time in four areas of knowledge and skills:

- Learning the legalities of the country's job market;
- Making yourself competitive against other job-seekers by knowing what you have to offer;
- Understanding and accepting the cultural differences in your new home;
- Developing job-specific skills to land your first job.

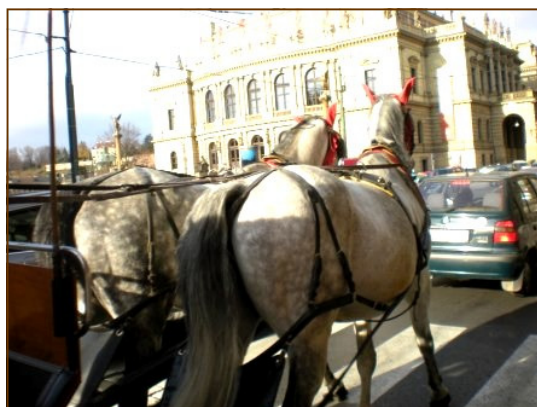
In addition to being sure you have the necessary knowledge of yourself and of the country, as well as useful skills, you also must supply yourself with an attitude that combines determination with imagination, flexibility and humor. Without the "right" attitude, it'll be hard to put down roots and begin developing an international career.

1. Here or There?

One question to consider is this: do you want to work in a foreign country, or in a firm or organization in your home country that deals with other countries?

For example, you could work for the United Nations, any large university, a non-profit organization or an international business and build an international career without leaving the security of home.

Naturally, you'll still need the right knowledge, skills and attitude, as outlined above, but your international experience will be less exotic and more limited. On the upside, you may have a more reliable pension plan and Social Security; you can keep in better touch with your family of birth; you can still be an American (or whatever nationality) and pay your taxes at home.



What you lose in this kind of international career, however, is the excitement and challenge of measuring yourself in terms of a different culture. By living abroad, you learn to reach inside yourself for resources you may never tap "at home."

2. Transferable skills

Building a career, rather than just getting a job, calls for an extensive set of transferable skills. Cross-cultural communication skills are probably the most vital skills, as you have to find creative ways of understanding and being understood by people with entirely different expectations and mental constructs of what is "correct" and "normal," and of what's "expected" of you.

Management, organizational and interpersonal skills are also crucial; leadership skills can get you to places you may scarcely dream of at the moment. The entire panoply of liberal arts skills is both used and enhanced in an international career.

The fun part

Just reading these two newsletters, you may feel a bit exhausted and even a bit daunted in your quest for an international job. But don't forget the fun factor of working abroad! You will meet people from all over the world, people like yourself who want to stretch their perceptions and contribute their uniqueness in a foreign country. "Expats" make friends fast, since you don't know how long anyone will be around. The pace of life living abroad is quick, and there's always something new to discover about your adopted home.

With the right preparation, some luck and an adventure-some spirit, working abroad can be a dramatically life-changing and mind-expanding experience. Challenging yourself this way in your career can help you to discover a new life, one of purpose and fulfillment.