

Repatriate Your Career

By: Robin Pascoe

The professional question which torments so many accompanying expatriate partners when they move overseas is what do you do? But the one heard most upon coming home can be even more daunting. What do you want to do now???

Spouses, I believe, can begin to wrestle with that existential question, at the heart of the challenges of repatriating a career after years abroad, by first and foremost placing professional value on the experience they gained while living abroad.

“When we return home,” I wrote in *Homeward Bound: A Spouse’s Guide to Repatriation* which I published after my own personal experience of several repatriations during my partner’s fifteen year career with the Canadian Foreign Service, “it is so easy to be blinded by self-pity, exhaustion, third party scrutiny, and just plain stupidity that we fail to assign any value to the experience we gained as expatriates.”

Even the experts can be blinded. I certainly was when we repatriated to Canada. For the first couple of years we were back, in my own country but in a new city where I had no professional contacts whatsoever, I still wanted to rent a giant truck and run over my two first books about expatriate life which I wrote and published while living abroad.

Like so many others who returned before me, I held the view that now that I was home, I should do something completely different (including find a full time career which would wreak havoc with my home life as my partner is a road warrior gone about 60% of the time, a situation I share with so many returning spouses). I failed to recognize I would literally be throwing away all that I had accomplished abroad.

Life has a way of interceding, fortunately, and I ended up being drawn back into doing not only what I do best (which is write and speak) but more importantly, something that mattered to me and gives me the energy to jump out of bed in the morning with a wonderful sense of purpose. Other spouses, I have learned, have become equally inspired.

Interculturalist and career counselor Gina Teague, a British expat living and working in New York City, helps spouses facing employment challenges upon repatriation and turning their international experience into new careers at home.

Says Gina: “I know of an American woman who started a catering business in New York upon her love of Asian food; a Brazilian woman who continued her passion for yoga by opening up a studio on her return to Rio; and an Australian woman who was so reluctant to let go of her overseas experience that she opened up a business importing and selling Indonesian furniture so she had the perfect excuse to make regular trips back to her former host country.”

The most important factors facing spouses on repatriation according to Gina, will be employment opportunities in the city or country of relocation; length of time spent overseas; change in lifestyle or life stage; changes in technology, the workplace, and of course the company or industry of choice during the spouse’s absence.

So how does she advise spouses to get them started on new careers at home?

“Firstly, I would advise a repatriating spouse not to wait until she/he sets foot on home soil!” says Gina quite emphatically. She recommends that long before the repatriation, a spouse begin to re-activate networks left behind with former colleagues, mentors, professional associations or alumni groups—anyone, she says, who may be in a position to provide information or a potential lead in career planning and job search activities.

“Before repatriating, get letters of reference, from an overseas employer if you had worked or a faculty member if you studied. If you did voluntary work or were active in an expatriate group, get a fellow member to write a recommendation based on the skills that you utilized and the experience garnered. Prospective employers like to see that you have continuously sought out professional growth opportunities. Work experience doesn’t have to be full-time paid employment to qualify as resume material,” she advises.

Companies or organizations which sponsored the move in the first place can also help spouses in this process, according to Valerie Scane, a Houston-based spousal consultant for her partner’s company Conoco. It was Conoco which offered her the support in the first instance while on a posting abroad to Aberdeen, allowing Valerie to study and obtain her MBA. They did so after a lot of pushing, reports Valerie, but in the end, her partner’s company gave her a \$5000 USD assignment financial grant designed to allow spouses to pursue their studies abroad.

Now that she’s working on spousal issues at company headquarters, Valerie sees even more opportunities for companies to assist spouses. Like career counselor Gina Teague, she also believes that a spouse should not wait until repatriation to get started on looking at future prospects, especially if it they want any company assistance.

“Repatriation can be the end of the relationship between companies and spouses, not the beginning,” she believes. “Companies need to recognize the value the spouse has brought to the assignment, and part of that recognition at re-entry can be helping them re-think their professional lives. They can do this through financial and business support.”

Both experts agree that taking the time to re-think professional options is vital for a spouse contemplating the next career move. I certainly agreed in *Homeward Bound* by stressing the importance of a transition period upon repatriation.

“This transition period is a time out to help you avoid the urge to plunge into the wrong job or situation too soon,” I wrote in defense of a length of time (it may last up to 6 months or longer) when a spouse needs “uncomplicated time and space to contemplate all that you have experienced and gained while overseas.”

In stressing the need for this transition time, I even quoted from one of those self-help books which normally irritate me but I grudgingly admit often hold a kernel of truth. In her daily meditations for women in *Simple Abundance*, author Sarah Ban Breathnach wrote: “Transformation cannot occur without transition,” she wrote as a meditation for May 23rd. As that happens to be my birthday, I took her words as a new age sign, but have since learned how absolutely vital that time out can be out to re-assess a career. Naturally, I didn’t take my own advice and suffered the consequences of jumping too quickly into a very unsuitable business partnership.

Gail MacIndoe, founder of ExpatriateAgency.com which helps people relocating to the UK, is a public relations professional who managed to work in her field both while living abroad with her parents as a third culture kid and then later, when she married a Scotsman whose work for an energy company would keep them on the move for twenty years. Gail always managed to find work related to public relations overseas, culminating in an MBA and project management work in the media in the UK when

they first repatriated. Ironically, it was an unexpected lengthier repatriation that provided her with the inspiration to become an entrepreneur but only, she says, after she took some time off to decide what she really wanted to do.

“We were supposed to be posted to Houston last year so I quit my job,” Gail told me. “When that ended up falling through, I had to re-think my professional life entirely and decided I wanted to be my own boss.” She took a web design course followed by a diploma in business coaching and ExpatAgency.com was born.

“It wasn’t my first choice to become an entrepreneur,” she admits. “But after trying full time employment in the UK for two years (since it was impossible to find decent part-time jobs) and being in effect a single parent since my husband works abroad most of the time, I had had enough. I am so happy I made the leap.”

Don’t worry if you are already home and didn’t pave the way before hand. There are still numerous steps you can take once you are on home soil. Gina Teague recommends several ways spouses can engage in kick starting a professional life.

A few good sessions with a career counselor are a must: A good professional can help re-evaluate career related preferences, life stage priorities, and developmental needs. As well, a local counselor will be able to offer advice on the local job market for a targeted field, identify growth areas, and connect spouses to local resources and professional development or educational opportunities.

Don’t expect a prospective employer to necessarily understand or appreciate international experience: Whether it’s a small local company or a large multinational, spouses need to take the initiative both in the interview and on the job in order to translate for the new employer how his/her international expertise, intercultural competencies and language skills can be of tangible benefit to an employer.

Don’t fall into the ‘martyr mom’ trap of deferring professional decisions until every last person in the family is settled: Re-entering the workplace, particularly one that has changed radically after a lengthy overseas sojourn, can be overwhelming. Make it less intimidating by developing an action plan that breaks down the process into small steps—perhaps setting aside a couple of hours every day to research, see a counselor, or attend a class.

In *Homeward Bound*, I also offered up a few more practical suggestions such as putting together a career portfolio which includes all sorts of reference letters and resumes to physically show a new employer. I also think spouses should invest in marketing materials to showcase themselves, even beginning with something simple like a new business card.

But my most important piece of advice, which I believe helps spouses in career transition and which I did actually take, is to sit down and write your own mission statement.

“If the question what do you want to do now? makes you want to fling yourself off the nearest cliff, then you need a ready answer to stop you from jumping,” I wrote in *Homeward Bound*, and not entirely facetiously.

“One way to develop that answer (and not coincidentally help sharpen your focus too) is to write your own mission statement. It doesn’t need to be long, in fact two sentences will do. Even just five words will work. I write book for expatriates. That’s mine, but it took me over two years upon my own re-entry to see that.”

Finally, spouses need to change the way they view repatriation according to Gina Teague. “Re-entry provides a blank slate and a unique opportunity to incorporate and build upon those aspects of the international experience that were the most rewarding and enjoyable,” she says.

I heartily agree that re-entry couldn't be a better time for personal growth. But be warned: patience will be a much tested virtue in this exercise.

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