

Young Global Professionals: The 'Hidden' Expats

By: Robin Pascoe

Unlike many of their older counterparts, the new younger breed of global professional will move on a moment's notice and have no dependents to worry about. They are so eager for international experience they are willing to be hired on as 'locals', which just happens to coincide with business needs to cut expensive expat packages to the bone. But the trip isn't all plain sailing, as expat expert Robin Pascoe reports.

So a young person's transition to working in a foreign country and the ensuing culture shock should be easy, right? Wrong.

"The challenge of being a young expat professional today is not just working abroad but living abroad," says Margaret Malewski, a Canadian born in Montreal, who completed her university education in Poland, was based in Geneva and the Middle East for Proctor & Gamble for several years, and is now living in Vancouver. She is 28.

Malewski is currently writing a book for an audience she calls GenXpat in which she examines the needs of young global professionals, a group she can clearly identify with. She believes the culture shock of a new workplace, while formidable, is often outweighed by challenges on the home front.

"On the surface, GenXpat have lots of friends, go out every night, and have great jobs. But on a deeper level they are lonely, have no sense of roots or community, and can be lacking in depth and continuity in their lives as they bop around from airport to airport and city to city," says Malewski. "The challenge is really about creating a balanced, fulfilling, sustainable lifestyle."

Malewski identifies two key issues facing the younger generation. The first one is the fact that young professionals typically move alone and with little or no support. This, she believes, often leads to burnout.

"There is no partner at home to start building a social network while you are at work, on top of handling the relocation paperwork and logistics as well as the professional transition alone," she says.

While single, unaccompanied expats of all ages would likely identify with that challenge, it's doubtful they feel the burden of the second issue she highlights:

"Since they are often hired as locals, young people don't receive any of the usual support which goes into an expat package like language or cross-cultural training. They are like a 'hidden' expat, facing financial and cultural challenges at the same time," she believes.

And then there are the age-related, developmental challenges which don't vanish with relocation, such as finding and maintaining a relationship.

"Today's young expat professional may be single, dating, or living with someone but still at the stage where both partners are trying to prove themselves professionally and more likely to value an international assignment over a relationship," says Malewski. All of those relationships are difficult to sustain.

Some may find true love abroad and then discover yet another unexpected challenge: going 'home' to meet respective in-laws.

The bride in a newly-wed American couple living in Africa about to be posted to a hardship, high security risk posting, confessed via e-mail that she's more nervous about meeting her new husband's parents in the US this summer, than about moving to a dangerous location.

"We know each other without any family context," this woman of 27 wrote to me. "I'm nervous that we won't fit in well with the families. Or maybe I won't like the way he acts around his family. And of course, neither side wants us to stay overseas," she says.

"A big challenge to meeting and eloping overseas is a lack of family, community and support for a new marriage. We were really alone for the first six months and depended on each other for just about everything. It was hard for us with few friends and no family to cope during those months. In my job, there are not many young people, mostly people with two or three kids. So the support system is there, but not terribly appropriate and people with kids are busy."

But how important is a support system anyway for a young person off on an international adventure?

Jean-Marc Hachey, author of "Big Guide to Living and Working Overseas" — about to release its fourth edition of advice for young international professionals — believes that in the long run, it may be important for the development of a young professional to actually experience challenges, live in less than desirable inexpensive parts of town, and be forced to mingle more with the locals than their elders do.

"There's almost a need for that lack of a safety net," believes Hachey who speaks and consults regularly on the young global professional. "It's part of the growing and development process and will in the end, serve the young person well by giving him, or her, the experience of dealing with challenges."

Hachey also points out that twenty years ago when young people went abroad, they usually picked up their international experience as volunteers, going into tough places wearing khakis and t-shirts, carrying nothing but a knapsack. Today, they have a laptop on their back, are wearing business suits, and have higher expectations, reflecting the values of a generation with a heightened sense of entitlement.

Companies and organizations trying to attract the best and brightest of this generation, Hachey says, are already doing so through professional internships.

"There is a major trend right now among almost every major organization operating globally to offer internship programs which may not only provide more support for a young person, but also offers the organisation a better selection of candidates."

In the meantime, Margaret Malewski recommends that companies need to do a reassessment of their expat population.

"If they find there is a significant number of expats who do not follow the traditional model of senior executive with wife and two children, then I think it warrants a reformulation of their expatriate policies."

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