
Event Report

2008 CWIB Conference Panel: “The Realities of Working Abroad: Advice for Seekers of International Careers”

FEBRUARY 22, 2008

On February 22, 2008, Columbia Women in Business (CWIB), a student organization at Columbia Business School, held its 15th annual conference. The panel “The Realities of Working Abroad” focused on just that: the day-to-day realities of living and working in a foreign country. The featured panelists were Andrea Bryant, managing director for the synthetic CDO/credit derivatives department at Standard & Poor’s; Luanne D. Zurlo, founder and executive director of Worldfund, a nonprofit that invests in schools, student programs and teacher training in Latin America; and Vera Chota, global leader for IBM’s university recruiting. The panelists moved beyond theoretical discussions of working overseas to practicalities by addressing the motivations, the logistics and the challenges that come with overseas work. By sharing personal anecdotes, best practices and a few words of warning, the panelists provided a primer for those considering an international business career. The panel was moderated by Viola Li, MBA ’09.

In the global business world, overseas work experience is becoming an increasingly significant commodity. In spite of this, most conversations on this topic tend to focus on the hypothetical value of overseas work experience, as opposed to the day-to-day realities of living and working in a foreign country. Focusing on the practical, the panelists for “The Realities of Working Abroad” offered pragmatic advice and relevant real-life experiences to an audience filled with students interested in international business careers.

Why Live Abroad? Skills and Experiences

All three panelists began the discussion by reflecting on the role that international experiences had played in their childhoods. In fact, all three panelists had spent part of their childhoods living outside the United States, and two still have family overseas. Andrea Bryant of Standard & Poor’s saw this as a primary factor in her motivation to develop an international career, saying, “My interest in working overseas was really framed in my childhood.” The panelists agreed that, compared with people in most other countries, Americans are unusual in their tendency to spend the majority of their working lives in their home country. This, they agreed, was related to the fact that most Americans speak only one language, which in turn is becoming an increasingly significant barrier for Americans interested in overseas work, especially as the international job market becomes more competitive.

It was also clear that seekers of international careers are, to a certain degree, a self-selecting group. Panelists highlighted natural curiosity as the primary trait that they all shared and that they felt motivated their desire to live and work abroad. Luanne Zurlo of Worldfund talked animatedly about how positive her experiences living in Latin America had been. “The excitement factor gets in your blood!” she exclaimed. However, she also cautioned prospective overseas workers to be realistic about the challenges they would face working overseas, saying, “Everything about working overseas is harder than working nationally.”

According to the panelists, the challenges of overseas work range from the mundane, such as hours spent sitting in airports, to larger quality-of-life issues, such as the loneliness of being in a culture where one doesn’t speak the language proficiently and the impact that spending so much time away has on one’s relationships at home. Vera Chota of IBM noted, “Hours are tough with international assignments—long nights, early mornings.” She encouraged anyone considering moving overseas to be realistic about the transition and to think hard about “all the everyday things [from home that] you would miss.”

The challenges notwithstanding, all three panelists became visibly excited while talking about the many upsides of working abroad. Ms. Zurlo highlighted the way that overseas work had taught her to “think on her feet” and to develop more flexibility. She also explained that, in her experience, business systems are less developed in Latin America; as a result, the diminished level of planning reduces a person’s ability to exert control. Ms. Bryant seemed to agree, candidly admitting that working overseas “really calmed me down. I was a control freak.”

Ms. Bryant also highlighted the ways that working overseas teaches people about themselves, saying, “You are far away from your family, and you really start getting to know you.” Ms. Chota strongly agreed and put particular emphasis on the confidence that working abroad had instilled in her, saying that the time she has spent working overseas has given her the confidence to know that “I can be thrown anywhere and somehow I will survive.”

Several of the panelists also suggested that being willing to work overseas can provide opportunities for advancement that might not otherwise be available. Ms. Zurlo, who before founding an NGO dedicated to improving Latin American education was a top-rated securities analyst focusing on Latin American telecommunications, said, “I never would have landed the kind of job that I had, had I not been focused on Latin America.”

All of the panelists emphasized the importance of the human element in succeeding overseas and the more relaxed and personal style that characterizes many business interactions. “The richness of working abroad,” Ms. Chota said, “comes from the relationships you build.”

How to Learn About Opportunities and Find a Job Abroad

For those not daunted by a work environment in constant flux and time spent away from home, the panelists encouraged prospective overseas workers to be strategic. They recommended identifying what the skill needs are in a local area and working to develop strengths in those areas while also displaying a willingness to take the steps to get involved internationally. Ms. Bryant recommended studying the politics, history and evolution of the countries that interested prospective overseas workers. To those who work at a large company with overseas offices, she suggested trying to work on international teams and understand the goals of the organization. Ms. Chota mentioned that many of her best overseas assignments came from volunteering to participate in projects. Ms. Bryant agreed, encouraging the audience to “get up at 2 a.m. and attend the Asian meeting.”

All of the panelists agreed that, beyond expressing enthusiasm for working overseas, it is vital to speak at least two languages. In particular, the panelists recommended learning a language that will make possible working in a developing economy, where the panelists believe most overseas job opportunities will be found. They also stressed the importance of being culturally aware, particularly as a woman. Ms. Bryant said, “I was based in Japan from 2000 to 2003 as a senior manager. Being culturally aware cannot be oversold.” Ms. Chota agreed, saying, “If you don’t know the culture, ask around. It’s really important that you respect people’s cultures.”

Strategies for Succeeding While Overseas

All three of the panelists spoke about the challenges of managing an overseas team, particularly as a woman in cultures where women are less likely to assume leadership roles. They highlighted the importance of good communication. “You have to understand when it’s not a yes, even when they won’t say no,” Ms. Zurlo said. “You have to understand the nuance of language. Americans are very direct—as long as you can really bring something to the table, the American characteristic of being direct can be well received.” The panelists made it clear that it is important for managers to identify when they have been misunderstood and, if necessary, to adopt a different style of communication. All of the panelists found that to build trust and understanding it was particularly vital to build relationships with their team members and colleagues. Ms. Chota noted, “You have to connect with people as people first.”

Ms. Bryant, who has spent much of her career moving back and forth between domestic and overseas posts, stressed the importance of preparing to return even while still living abroad by staying connected to what is happening domestically. Finally, Ms. Zurlo stressed the significance of having a strong understanding of macroeconomics while working in developing countries, where, she pointed out, “you often have opportunities to live through the impacts of the theories we only discuss at school.”

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