

Imagine the day when you have enough international experience that you can start considering yourself a global citizen. Your credentials now qualify you for professional international jobs (at home or abroad). Alternatively, you may have decided to look for domestic employment and now want to know how to market your international expertise to employers who have no international experience. This article will help you get the best punch from your previous international experience in either of these cases.

Take an Inventory of Your Experience

If you have travelled or lived abroad, you are well on your way to developing a solid International IQ. This is a unique package of skills possessed by people who have lived abroad, and these are the skills sought out by international employers. Before writing a resume, you need to review what international skills you have gained from your experience. The following will help you take note of your international skills:

- **Study abroad courses:** If you studied for less than one full semester abroad, the subject of your studies is less important than the broader international experience you have had. Nonetheless, take note of your courses and be prepared to describe the school you attended while abroad. Did you study in a highly-accredited academic program, or was it a study-and-travel session? Was the student body international or comprised predominantly of students from your own country?
- **Professional experience abroad:** Hopefully you supercharged the international value of your time abroad by doing a few extra things that look good on a resume. Employers want to know that you successfully accomplished tasks in a foreign environment. Did you lead a volunteer team? Did you complete projects within a multicultural environment? Did you meet professionals in your field? Did you organize a social event? Did you work part-time with a professor or as a language coach? Did you volunteer in your field? Did you overcome a bureaucratic hurdle by making use of professional skills? Audit your time abroad for professional experiences and be prepared to describe them in your resume and when meeting employers.
- **Country-specific skills:** Can you speak about the specific cultural traits of your host country nationals? If not, you can easily read up on this by consulting books written on country-specific cultural traits for example, by Intercultural Press (www.interculturalpress.com). Imagine the impact on potential employers when you are able to contrast the work habits of your German host with US citizens. You also gain points with employers if you have traveled independently or lived with host nationals. In all these cases, prepare descriptions that support your professional and intercultural skills.
- **Universal cross-cultural skills:** While abroad, you developed a unique set of cross-cultural skills. These are portable! You can take these and apply them to any new country. You are familiar with culture shock and can professionally describe it. You understand the cycle of stress and exhilaration that comes with moving to a new place. You are more adaptable, open minded, and observant. You can spot cultural differences and change your behavior to accommodate local norms. You have a better understanding of yourself and you can use this self-knowledge when making decisions in a culture other than your own. You are curious, brave, and have a sense of adventure. At the same time you are streetwise and can function in unfamiliar environments.
- **Language skills:** You already know that language skills are important for international and domestic employers. Even basic or obscure language skills indicate a propensity for language-learning in general. When communicating with employers, indicate the level of reading, writing, and speaking you have acquired. Always describe what you can do as opposed to what you can't.
- **General work skills:** When speaking to employers, recognize the value of the general skills you developed while abroad. You are adept at managing change; you are independent and have self-discipline while being sensitive to the needs of others. Dozens of work-related characteristics are developed abroad: resourcefulness, versatility, persistence, an observant and calm demeanour, diligence, multifaceted skills in communications, broad and strategic thinking, an ability to deal with ambiguities, courage, an ability to take on challenging work, open-mindedness, flexibility, resourcefulness, tact, listening and observing skills, an ability to deal with stress, sense of humour,

awareness of interpersonal politics, respect for protocol and hierarchy, loyalty, and tenacity. All of these skills and traits are valuable to you when contacting domestic as well as international employers.

How to Explain Your International Experience

You are already aware that, with the exception of others who have lived abroad, very few people are interested in or able to understand your international experiences. Be cautious about discussing your international experience when meeting prospective employers. Here are a few tips to help you down this delicate path:

- **Be professional in describing your international experience:** You are probably fairly animated about the challenges you faced while abroad. Practise rewording your description of job responsibilities in a more businesslike manner. Be formal. Be articulate.
- **Use the language of your future work:** Let go of the expatriate jargon that has become second nature to you. Avoid using names and titles your prospective employer will not understand. Avoid detailed geographical descriptions. Speak in terms familiar to your audience, for example; use "adjustment" instead of "culture shock"; use "able to deal with change" instead of "cross-cultural adaptability"; use "interpersonal skills" instead of "cultural sensitivity"; use "effective listening skills" instead of "cross-cultural communications"; use "political astuteness" instead of "diplomacy."
- **Speak of your successes and your accomplishments:** Do not discuss in detail why you did not succeed at something – tell employers what you accomplished. Employers, especially those with no international experience, will not understand the context and could form erroneous conclusions about your capabilities.
- **Avoid shocking stories:** Do not go into bizarre tales or misadventures. The harder your experience abroad, the more cautious you should be in talking about the difficulties you encountered.
- **Network with other returnees:** Actively seek out others who have recently returned from abroad and can provide mutual support during your job search. Find these people on the Internet and through the organization that sent you abroad.

How to Boast About Your Skills

It can feel awkward to boast about your own skills. Non-North Americans in particular have a cultural aversion to selling themselves to employers. Here are a few tips to make the act more palatable when networking with employers:

- **Say what others say about you:** "My previous supervisor relied on me mainly to..." "My student-colleagues appreciate working with me because..."
- **Say why you were successful:** "I can attribute my successes to being able to..." "In my previous position, I was commended for..." "This project was successfully managed because I..."
- **Say how you do things:** "When managing a project, I always pay close attention to..." "I am particularly well known for my skills in..." "My general approach in these circumstances is to..."

Write an Elevator Pitch

There are multiple situations wherein you will need to respond to someone saying "Tell me about yourself." Imagine that you have one short elevator ride to explain to a potential employer who you are. A two-paragraph professional description of yourself written before you write your resume will help you figure out the high level attributes of the professional you. These are your "main" selling points; focus on highlights only. Decide on a theme to bring it all together. Your first paragraph should be your hard skills (work, study, volunteer experience). Build your theme around international experience if looking for international work. The second should be about your skills (what makes you succeed in your work environment). This second paragraph is the most challenging. Ensure that it all ties in all together supporting your major theme.

Develop a Stock of Career Stories

Everyone who has studied abroad has their own list of “wild and shocking” stories to share with friends. These edgy cross-cultural experiences are fun to share, but not with potential employers. You need to modify them or devise a new set of cross-cultural career-related stories. Craft these stories ahead of time, and build on them to reinforce professional skill sets. Here are a few examples:

- Describe your role when working with cross-cultural teams members.
- Describe your encounters with professionals working in your field.
- Speak about personal encounters to show insight into the local culture.
- Speak about the link between your country and the host country, especially in terms of the workplace. Describe your professional skills through a story about a cross-cultural encounter that went wrong.

You only need three or four of these pre-scripted career stories when job searching. One story alone is often enough to demonstrate a whole group of your professional skills—maturity, insightfulness, sound judgment, cross-cultural knowledge, etc.

Educational Credentials on Your Resume

Younger professionals and “career changers” should write about their education experience more extensively than mid-career professionals. Write about your educational “career” as if it were a job. You are not doing justice to yourself if you devote only two lines to your study abroad experience. Start with the normal header information, but follow it up with bullets outlining the experience you had while abroad and the skills you developed. Refer to this article’s “inventory of skills” section for examples of what to write.

Other bullets to consider when describing your study abroad or other educational experiences are: significant projects, field studies, cross-cultural mentoring, team leadership, and awards. If you studied at a world-renowned school or with a famous professor, reference this. Perhaps indicate how you overcame financial challenges by working while abroad. If you traveled while studying, or if you had close cross-cultural contact, write a bullet about this.

Do not list courses taken, but always list areas of interest. This tells employers much about your professional personality and most likely points to your top skills, since we tend to be good at what we enjoy.

If you are applying for international work, consider grouping all your international experiences (work, volunteer, study abroad, international courses, travel, and languages) under one heading for greater impact.

Dealing With International Employers

Don’t mix personal goals with career goals. Never announce to potential international employers that your career goal is to live in Paris or to travel extensively in Asia. Employers want to hear about goals that match their skill requirements. Tell employers that you want:

- to apply the unique set of international skills you developed while studying for two years in Spain.
- to work in an environment that requires you to make use of the insights and knowledge acquired while accomplishing work within a multicultural team environment.
- to apply the experience and skills you developed while studying economics for two years in London.

The focus is on skills, not on your personal goals.

Dealing With Employers Who Have No International Experience

Employers with little or no international experience may have misconceptions about job seekers who have international credentials such as study abroad and international travel. While not all employers believe the following myths about returnees, you may want to keep them in mind.

POSSIBLE EMPLOYER ASSUMPTIONS:

- **Returnees have emotional re-adjustment problems:** They have trouble accepting a North American lifestyle.
- **Returnees are too exotic:** They have adopted alternative lifestyles and can’t be team players. They are excessively individualistic and independent. Their differences are threatening.
- **Returnees are flighty:** They don’t really want permanent jobs or long-term responsibilities. They will soon be off traveling again.
- **Returnees have health problems:** They may have strange tropical diseases.

YOUR SOLUTIONS:

- **Do not overstate or dwell on your re-entry adjustment problems:** Stress positive aspects of your experience abroad and re-entry.
- **Do not say that you plan to return abroad:** Clearly state your intentions to stay in the country.
- **State that you are happy to be back:** This is your home. You are anxious to join your peers in the working world.
- **Demonstrate your business acumen:** Draw attention to your effective work habits, adaptability to new technologies, willingness to be a team player, understanding of Western leadership style.
- **Avoid wearing souvenir clothing or jewellery:** Dress in smart, businesslike clothing. Focus on fitting in.
- **Show your attachment to home:** Mention your enthusiasm for things like home cooking, a particular university, or a sports team. Talk about the pleasures of finally reading your home-country newspapers again.
- **Mention the clean bill of health:** Let the employer know you received a clean bill of health for your recent physical.

A Last Word

If you have travelled and lived abroad, you know the value that this type of international experience brings you. You have now returned home a stronger you. You have insights into the world that others who have not traveled do not have. You are conscious of a wider set of ideas about humanity. Your planet is smaller, your insights larger. Whether you are speaking to domestic or international employers, your international experience will always provide you with strengths and vision that are almost unattainable under circumstances other than living abroad. Your intellect is stimulated and your mind is free when you live in close proximity to people who have a different culture from your own. Good luck and best wishes in your career of continued learning.



*See the
Article Version*

Want more advice?
Login or register for free access to
MyWorldAbroad.com

Your free subscription paid for by your school.