



Countering the Myths of Women Working Abroad

By Stacie Nevadomski Berdan

Working internationally is probably the single greatest opportunity today for women to fast-track their careers. In my book, *Get Ahead By Going Abroad, A Woman's Guide to Fast-Track Career Success*, I offer tips, advice and real women's stories that shed light on this global trend. The questions I'm most often asked relate to the reality of women succeeding in overseas positions. Read on for the Top 10 commonly-held myths and facts about women working abroad. **Go Global!**

Myth #1: Women don't do as well as men overseas

Fact: On the contrary, studies indicate that women have an 18% higher success rate than men. Women possess traits deemed critical in cross-cultural situations, such as style flexing through adaptability; skill at building teams and relationships in a non-threatening way; patience and persistence also known as "grace under pressure"; communication skills such as listening closely to the verbal and intuiting the non-verbal; and an open-minded approach to diverse and different circumstances. These traits, combined with excellent technical skills, make a woman working overseas a powerful force. Women have what it takes to succeed internationally.

Myth #2: Women aren't accepted as equals in international business circles

Fact: The international marketplace appreciates top-notch skills, and because the demand is outpacing the need for international players, gender doesn't usually come into play. Some countries, of course, do not treat women as equals, but this discrimination generally applies to local nationals and not foreigners. Each country must be assessed individually, however, and doing your homework is another critical component to success. The vast majority of women who work abroad agree that if you are good at what you do, you will be accepted in international business circles as a professional first. In fact, many women claim they were given "instant credibility": why else would a large multinational company or well-known organization send a woman if she were not the best? Indeed!

Myth #3: It's only for young/junior professionals

Fact: Going abroad works at any stage or age in a woman's professional's career – it just does so in different ways. If you are junior, you may have less ties and therefore more flexibility with timing and locale and greater ability to move around and quickly. If you are middle management, you can jumpstart a stalled career or accelerate an already brilliant one given the greater likelihood of line and management experience in smaller markets. If you are senior, you may have the opportunity to manage a large-scale P&L or regional team, responsibility you may need to make the last leap to executive management – or simply round out your career with an international assignment.

Myth #4: I can't go; I'm married.

Fact: While taking a spouse overseas with you undoubtedly complicates matters, it can be done. Of the 200 professionals I surveyed, 40% were married. Since women are being transferred at an increasing rate, it seems to be working out much more often than not. Spouses are finding jobs upon arrival, reinventing their careers (as my husband did in Hong Kong), not working and, a trend we're seeing on the rise, asking to be transferred by their company as a fellow expat. However, there is no doubt that living abroad can put stress on a marriage especially in the more exotic postings. According to the women who've done it, it will either strengthen the bonds or break the weak ones so be sure to consider this factor carefully. For both men and women, an unhappy spouse is cited as the most common reason why international assignments fail.

Myth #5: I can't go; I have children.

Fact: Having children shouldn't stop a career, and an international move shouldn't prove to be any more challenging. In fact, many women who lived overseas with children found maternity leave to be more generous and child care better and more affordable, thus enabling them to focus more on their jobs. In general, the younger the children the less complicated and disruptive the move will be. Raising children in a cross-cultural environment may be one of the most beneficial things you can do for them in these increasingly global times. Your adaptation, tolerance and acceptance of things different from the

norm teach them the same – not to mention the potential for multiple language skills. Markets differ significantly, however, and it is wise to do a site visit and speak to other expat parents to get the low-down. Safety, education and medical care rank as the highest priorities for parents moving with children.

Myth #6: I don't speak a second language.

Fact: While language skills greatly enhance the overall overseas experience, they're not mandatory; English remains the international language of business. The real question – beyond language – is what value do you bring to the business? Your technical skills, management experience or in-depth knowledge of your company or industry should outweigh the need for language skills if you don't have them. With that said, language skills and cross-cultural know-how may give you a significant leg-up in the increasingly competitive world of overseas postings. Such skills enable you to integrate much faster into the local culture, enriching your experience and ability to deliver results. Studying language while you're there also provides added credibility with local colleagues and friends simply because you're trying. Brush up or start studying before you go by taking advantage of a new wave of interactive online e-learning tools now available.

Myth #7: It's not necessary in my field or industry.

Fact: While there are some professions that are local or mandated by state or country certifications, the vast majority are not and actually extend easily across borders. The breadth and depth of the global economy is astounding. Previously professionals thought only certain industries or professions needed to go global. Not true. Businesses compete at every level and across various markets. Constant technological advancements coupled with the booming growth in developing markets such as Brazil, Mexico, China, India, Russia and United Arab Emirates, demand that almost every professional understands how to tap the global economy for sustained growth – possibly even survival 20 years from now. Moreover, the advance of virtual teams and the new skills needed to manage a truly global and diverse workforce will affect most every professional, whether you move abroad or not, and so understanding this new world marketplace is critical for future success.

Myth #8: My market is the most important, fastest-growing place for business.

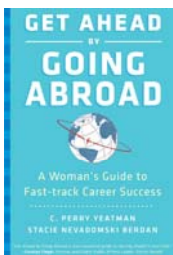
Fact: Whether you are in a sophisticated market like the U.S. or U.K., or in an explosive market like China, India, Russia or Brazil, multi-market experience is essential to understanding the global marketplace. Some professionals mistakenly think their market is “it”, but then a few years pass, currencies devalue and a new sleeping giant begins to wake up. The bottom line: Multi-market experience means working outside your comfort zone and across cultures. It is this professional growth that is primarily behind the rapid acceleration for those who choose to work abroad.

Myth #9: Out of sight; out of mind.

Fact: Perhaps the most compelling of the commonly given reasons for staying home is that leaving the center of the action – headquarters – creates a fear of being forgotten. However, the opportunities abound to distinguish yourself for greater recognition and increased responsibilities. It takes work, but if you set your mind to it, you may actually improve your profile and relationship with executive management by going abroad. Networking is critical to an overseas employee's long-term success as is a mentor – someone who not only knows you and your capabilities – but can vouch for the amazing work you are doing in a far-away market and help you leverage this success to greater gains back home.

Myth #10: Such transfers are uncommon.

Fact: While international assignments are competitive and tough to land, there are plenty out there and the numbers are on the rise. In fact, we're seeing an increase of 20-30 percent in transnational moves around the world – and the numbers for women are on the rise. Companies recognize the importance of international experience and realize the best way to get it is transferring employees. But if you are not on the list to be sent, consider moving yourself as many women have to great success. If you feel passionately about a place, prepare and plan properly and are willing to take some risks, you can do it. Do your research on topics such as labor laws, visas, taxes, cost of living and safety. Talk to others who live there to get a feel for the place. Visit and check things out, spending time looking at the reality of the place – not just dreaming about how wonderful it would be.



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