

Going Global

by Philippa Barr Can an air ticket help a woman through the glass ceiling? Author Perry Yeatman, who recently released *Get Ahead by Going Abroad* with co-author Stacie Nevadomski Berdan, believes it can – provided that it's for a flight to an international job posting.



Perry was just 25 years old when she fulfilled a long-held ambition to work abroad. An American from small-town Pennsylvania, she was amazed when at the age of 13 she went on a school trip to Europe and discovered how much more there was to the world than the US.

"I honestly grew up believing that Philadelphia was the world," she says. "Back in 1980s, the US was so insular. No one at school, in college, even at home, ever suggested that going overseas to work was an option. But after that trip, I made up my mind that that was what I was going to do, and it was the single most important decision I have made in my life."

Perry originally hoped to find work in Europe, but when the overseas transfer opportunity she wanted finally presented itself, it was in Singapore. "Singapore?" she recalls her family and friends saying.

After finding success in Singapore, Perry was next posted to Moscow, and then to London, before returning to the US after 10 years absence – having done business in over 70 countries.

"The germ of the idea for the *Get Ahead* book emerged years ago," Perry explains, "but it was after my daughter's birth three years ago that I knew it had to happen. Girls and women need to know the options that are open to them. I like to think of my book title in two parts: you *can* get ahead, and you *can* go abroad, but best of all, you can do both. And you can have a family, and you can write a book. Women can have it all; they just can't have it all at the same time."

There are two things about *Get Ahead by Going Abroad* that I very much admire. Firstly, the authors have hit a good balance of readability versus credibility – it's very human.

Despite incurring some criticism for including in a purportedly business-focused book a section on dating during your overseas posting, Perry insists it was appropriate. "You've got to be realistic," she says. "What single girl *doesn't* go overseas with some thought in the back of her mind that there might be a partner out there somewhere?"

But don't be misled; the book is not all 'girlie stuff'. Perry is a serious businesswoman, currently one of

the 50 most senior executives at Kraft Foods, and she takes her career – and the career advice she is dishing out – very seriously.

I am also impressed that although the book is written by American women, and cites the experiences of mainly American women, its authors have tried hard to consider the issues from the perspectives of different cultures and nationalities.

“Any culture or situation has good and bad aspects. For anyone to operate successfully internationally, they need to be able to get through the façade and work with the reality. Remember, an Arab working in Washington is going to feel as out of place as a Westerner working in Cairo.”

Globalisation means that more and more companies need employees with international experience. According to a study by the Society of Human Resource Management in the US, cited in the publisher’s publicity material, 69 percent of American employers currently state that they plan to increase the number of people they send abroad this year – up from just 21 percent two years ago. Having global experience is a key differentiator on a woman’s resume, at least as much as it is for a man.

“It’s important in an international career to take control. Know what you want, seek it out, and don’t compromise. Whether you remain within one company or change employers, it is difficult for people to understand your international experience. Therefore, you must make it clear to them what you have achieved, and what you want next. Keep on the radar of your own head office, and other offices and companies you would like to consider a move to.”

Living and working internationally can take you out of a pigeon-hole. Perry describes it as finding yourself in an “all hands on deck” environment. In head office, there might be a whole department full of marketing experts, but in an overseas branch, there’s no reason why the finance person shouldn’t chip in to tackle marketing work if there is no-one else on hand, or vice versa.

“Women can have it all; they just can’t have it all at the same time”

It strikes me that Perry has been very lucky. For a start, she found a loving husband in her mid-thirties, having satiated her passion for travel (for the time being!). She also went on to have a baby girl at the age of 39. Both of these achievements can prove elusive for many women who postpone them for so long.

But then, a lot of luck is self-engineered. Women quoted in the book talk about achieving balance in their lives. “I have balance now,” she stresses, “but I have that for three reasons: I’ve worked hard to get to this point in my career, I sought out a role in a company that values balance in its employees’ lives, and I insist on having it.”

Perry Yeatman is undoubtedly a success story, and I put it to her that despite the credence she places in international experience, she would have made it to senior vice-president level anyway. “True,” she agrees, “but I estimate it would have taken me 10 years longer. And I wouldn’t have had half as much fun.”

In Singapore briefly for Kraft when we meet, she is juggling promotional book interviews with her other responsibilities, and her family, who joined her on the trip. “Right now,” she says, “I’m concentrating on my job, being a good mom, and marketing my book. On the other hand, I’m 20 pounds overweight, I don’t paint my nails and I don’t date my husband often enough. But those things will come; like I said, I can have it all, but I can’t have it all at the same time.”

Perry Yeatman’s book *Get Ahead by Going Abroad* is published by HarperCollins and is available online or at major bookstores. Learn more about the authors and the research behind the title by visiting www.getaheadbygoingabroad.com.

