

Portable Expatriate Careers: Opportunities Abound

Galen Tinder

Imagine that you are the working spouse or partner of a person who has been transferred overseas. What are you going to do with yourself during the coming three-to-five years?

Researching your options, you find that in some countries the doors are relatively open to expatriate workers, in others they are partly ajar, and in many virtually closed. Even if your host country falls into one of the first two groups, you may encounter a language barrier or bureaucratic tangles of red tape. If you are fortunate enough to bypass these impediments, the prize at the end of your quest may be disappointing — a salaried position, perhaps, but not one in your field or specialty. Thus, while your work will keep you off the streets and bring in extra income, it may not maintain your career momentum or prepare you, upon repatriation, for picking up where you left off. There are, however, a number of potential solutions.

Changing Times

In the past, expatriate partners (mostly women) have often occupied themselves with non-vocational pursuits such as frequent social activities within the expatriate community, volunteer work, and travel. A combination of these pursuits can still make for an enjoyable and meaningful time abroad for some.

But over the last several years, expatriate employment concerns have grown more pressing – partly due to the global economy taking root over the past decade, establishing the regularity of relocations that cross borders, continents, and oceans. At the same time, the percentage of employed women has increased in the United States and other western nations while – and here is a key point – characterized by a corresponding increase in levels of responsibility and seniority. Expatriate partners are more likely to have careers

now than they may have had ten years ago but are less likely to find commensurate positions abroad.

These trends have placed pressure on nations to relax the strictures preventing employment of non-nationals. A number of international companies and organizations have banded together to found and support the Permits Foundation, a non-profit organization devoted to increasing the access of expatriates to employment opportunities around the world. Yet, even with these positive developments, many expatriate partners experience unfulfilled vocational aspirations in their host country. And this point is where need has joined with opportunity to create a new category of employment — the portable career (or portable job).

The Possibility of a Meaningful Career

One of the people most responsible for bringing the portable career to widespread public attention is Jo Parfitt, a writer, lecturer, and expert on expatriate life. As one of the first advocates of the portable career, Parfitt, who currently resides in The Hague, has just published the third edition of the fittingly titled, *A Career in your Suitcase*. From its first publication ten years ago, *Suitcase* has helped to raise awareness among the globally mobile of how the portable career can fulfill several purposes for the expatriate partner – providing a compelling life independent from the expatriate, helping to maintain and even expand a professional identity, and contributing to the family’s financial resources.

Parfitt effectively brings out the human dimension lurking behind these employment issues, quoting from women who have responded to surveys (see sidebar, “The Emotional Impact on Expatriate Partners”). These heartfelt statements and others like them substantiate the comment by Tom Jackson, author of *Guerilla Tactics in the Job Market*, that “It is more stressful to not have work when you want it than to do something you dislike.” Parfitt, who feels like a soul sister to these women, has made it her mission to

convince expatriate men and women that they can pursue a meaningful career, albeit one that may initially strike them as unconventional.

A portable career is often feasible in places where conventional employment is out of the question partly because it often flies beneath the radar. In some countries, although strict regulations mandate registration of portable careers, they are regulated less stringently because they are not taking a job from a local-national. Some host-country governments welcome the enterprising expatriate who informally begins a new career by supplying products or services that are needed and welcomed by the local populace. Nonetheless, if you are contemplating a portable job in your new location, it is best to research existing regulations.

Defining the Portable Career

According to Parfitt, “A career that you can put in your suitcase and take with you anywhere in the world is a portable career.” Its characteristics include:

- Easy to transport, with no heavy equipment to ship
- No warehouse of inventory that may be hard to sell and difficult to pack and take with you
- Capable of operating in multiple locations
- Sufficiently flexible to adapt to new opportunities and markets
- Allows the building of a global network that is not lost when you move
- Helps achieve your objectives (financial, fame, making a difference, whatever)
- Easy and quick to set up in a new location
- Sustainable despite moves

The common denominator in the most common portable careers (see sidebar, “Popular Portable Careers”) is that they can be conducted largely or entirely through virtual means. The emergence of the portable career represents the serendipitous joining of need with opportunity, the latter of which recently arrived in the form of the Internet and associated

technologies. The enormous advantage of the portable career is that neither one's business operations nor clients need to be in any one location. Expatriate partners can bring both business and clients along wherever they go.

While partially portable careers have existed for decades, the fully portable job is the offspring of the remarkable technologies that have arisen with the advent of the Internet. The first stage of Internet communications consisted of a mighty flow of information from the Internet to users. The Internet's interactive capabilities that have fueled the portable career often fall under a broad umbrella – Web 2.0 – that refers to the rapidly growing interactive capabilities and associated technologies whereby users interact with other users for fun or mutual benefit. Consider, for example, Amazon.com (for books and other products), Facebook (primarily social interactions), and LinkedIn (social and business purposes).

People launch many portable or partially portable careers as informal, local entrepreneurial projects. Those who fall into or work their way into portable careers are the first to testify that it is not a path for everyone. Those who do set out in an entrepreneurial direction should realize that to succeed, one must work very hard while remaining undeterred in the face of constant, annoying, and sometimes formidable obstacles – including the need to be Internet savvy and willing to learn a variety of technology-based business tools and practices (e.g., finance, accounting).

Passion Enhances the Work

Partly for these reasons, Parfitt strongly urges those considering a portable job or career to find a direction about which they have a passion. She believes that determination married to passion can accomplish almost anything. This determination will be necessary as the expatriate takes on some of the likely unfamiliar tasks that come with the territory. Parfitt illustrates her themes with inspirational real-life examples, such as:

- One woman who relocated to France began organizing wine-tasting parties, and eventually became an event planner who organized large gastronomic events, marketing and selling her services via the Internet.
- Another woman initially sold small artistic decorations at local open-air fairs. After experiencing some success, she expanded the business; three years later, she sells her artwork mostly to an international clientele through the Internet.

Parfitt's core message is that expatriates are surrounded by opportunities. If you can only identify your passion and pursue it with whole-hearted determination, anything is possible.

Galen Tinder, a regional manager for Ricklin-Echikson Associates (REA), which specializes in providing global transition assistance and career/life coaching services, is the author of three chapters in A Career in Your Suitcase. For more information about REA, visit www.r-e-a.com; for the book by Jo Parfitt, visit www.career-in-your-suitcase.com.

Sidebar: The Emotional Impact on Expatriate Partners

- "My self-esteem has taken a beating because I don't feel that I am contributing to our household finances."
- "I had no idea how much my sense of self-worth was tied to my career."
- "Due to my inability to be employed for the first time in my working life, I am dependent on another person. I feel trapped and observed all the time. This raises the level of stress enormously."
- "My loss of job, loss of self-esteem, and an imbalance in the relationship is very stressful."
- "I am made to feel like a second-class citizen. It is a lonely life. . . . It's exhausting and unrewarding. I regret my life."

Source: *A Career in Your Suitcase* by Jo Parfitt (Summertime Publishing)

Sidebar: Popular Portable Careers

- Teaching
- Virtual assistance
- Coaching
- Network marketing
- Online trading
- Writing
- Graphic design
- Website design and maintenance
- Online selling
- Art or photography

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