

BY MICHELE MARCHETTI

Going Global

WANT TO SHAKE UP YOUR CAREER? THINK ABOUT EXPORTING YOURSELF. THE REWARDS OF WORKING OVERSEAS CAN BE ESPECIALLY RICH FOR MIDLIFE WOMEN

Blythe McGarvie has great memories of the years she spent working for the BIC Group in Paris: waking each morning to the aroma of baking that wafted up from the patisserie downstairs; the glint of sunlight on the Louvre as she drove past on her commute in a company-issued BMW; relaxing after hours with a glass of *vin rouge* at her neighborhood bistro, Café Rostand.

But the best thing about McGarvie's job abroad is the way it transformed her career *after* that savory, French-press version of the daily grind. The experience took her in a completely new direction, one she hadn't foreseen when her old employer in Maine was sold and she took the job with the BIC Group, the Paris-based maker of products such as pens and razors. When McGarvie returned to the United States, she was delighted by the number of calls she got

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from headhunters. She turned down some good offers and took a different leap, launching the LIF Group, a speaking and leadership firm. McGarvie, now 51 and based in Williamsburg, Virginia, loves the turn her life has taken. She says she never would have imagined herself as an entrepreneur before her experience in France.

Working abroad sounds like the stuff of fantasy, an adventure more likely for a footloose twenty-something. But with globalization a mantra in every part of the economy—business, education, the arts—making it happen is easier than in the past, whether or not you work for a company or on your own. And a stint abroad can have a bigger payoff, beyond even the intrinsic pleasures.

Midlife is an ideal time to do it. “You have a confidence level in your forties and fifties that will help get you through the cultural differences,” McGarvie says. After climbing learning curves for years, you can be more forgiving with yourself. “When I was in Paris,” she says, “I gave myself permission to make three mistakes a day.”

Working abroad can be a great fit with personal lives too, whether you are a mother with a newly empty nest or a single woman yearning for change. Women in dual-career relationships report that their spouses or significant others are often quite willing to take a break from already established careers. Other couples decide that the spouse will stay home, a decision that’s not as stressful in a time-tested relationship. (McGarvie’s husband stayed put, visiting on holidays and over the summer.) And if you’re newly divorced, this can be a great way to



flip the script of your personal and work life.

Ticket to ride

American companies and organizations are sending waves of people across borders; 69 percent of multinationals reported an increase in overseas postings in 2006, according to one relocation firm. And the number of women working abroad for North American companies in 2006 was up nearly 400 percent from 2001, according to Mercer, a human resources consulting firm.

The same surveys show that it’s tough for companies to fill these posts with able, willing candidates. Despite all that demand, midlife women still encounter lingering resistance. Managers may not expect them to be willing or able to pick up and go abroad. In other cases, “There’s a cultural expectation that a woman has done the big climb up the ladder, and now is the time she gets to relax,” says Perry Yeatman, 43, coauthor of *Get*

Résumé booster: Working in Beijing could land you the promotion or raise you deserve.

Ahead by Going Abroad: A Woman’s Guide to Fast-Track Career Success. “But the reality I see today is that a woman hits 40 and says, ‘Damn. What else is it I really want to do with my life?’”

In 2001, Ellen Carberry, an entrepreneur with 20 years of experience, sold the Internet company she had cofounded to IBM and subsequently went to work for the corporation. She told her boss there that she planned to parlay the sale into a job with the company in China. They’d worked together at the start-up, and he had faith in her skills, she says. But “he laughed me out of the room.”

Nineteen months later, Carberry, then 42, moved to Beijing. How did she make it happen? When someone at IBM Asia Pacific asked her to send a PowerPoint presentation on a particular business problem, she persuaded the executive to bring her over to make the pitch in person. Before the short-term consulting assignment was over, she had a job offer. →



“When you’re so clear about what you want to do,” says Sally Carr, now at home in Kilcrohane, Ireland, “I think the stars align.”

That’s just the way to do it, says author Yeatman, who is also a senior vice president for global issues at Kraft. “Raise your hand often enough that people really believe you want it.”

Or, as her coauthor, Stacie Nevadomski Berdan, 41, says, “Stand up on your desk and shout your desire to go overseas. You can’t tell enough people often enough.” It worked for Berdan. She was a vice president at public relations giant Burson-Marsteller when she left for Hong Kong; she returned as a global managing director and has now gone out on her own.

Once you get the transfer, an international assignment can give you a spotlight you couldn’t capture at home, or it can jump you ahead in the line for promotion. Kathy Repa, a colleague of Yeatman’s at Kraft, took an assignment in Singapore at age 49 and says it gave her a chance to showcase her talents. As director of development for Kraft’s Asia Pacific region, she had to get a lot done with limited resources and work in a team that comprised 14 nationalities. “When you work in a very complex business environment, people take notice,” she says.

This past August, Repa returned to Kraft headquarters as a senior director in the human resources department with a significant promotion and pay raise. She now works with all the company’s operations, domestic and international. “This is the role I had been working toward the past 20 years,” she says.

The timing worked on a personal level too. Repa’s husband, a white-water rafting instructor, was traveling elsewhere while she was in Asia. They were in different

parts of the world seven months a year—which might have thrown them at an earlier age, Repa says.

Be your own tour guide

Getting yourself FedExed overseas by a corporate employer may be the simplest way to go. But other women find their own trade routes. ExpatWomen.com, a networking site that can help you do that, attracts close to 17,000 monthly visitors. (See “Global Positioning,” right, for more resources.) The founders estimate that half of their audience is in midlife.

Elizabeth Coss is something of an accidental expat. Less than a year ago, she was running a creative arts therapy department at a major New York hospital, teaching at New York University, and feeling stuck at work and in her personal life. First she decided that she was willing to leave New York, her longtime home. She wasn’t aiming overseas, says Coss, who is in her forties. But researching new opportunities was like adding a part-time job to her workload. So along with monitoring her professional association’s Web site and other sites in the mental health realm, she let all her friends and colleagues know she

GLOBAL POSITIONING: HOW TO GET THERE FROM HERE

To take your act on international roads, check these resources.

RESEARCH

✱ transitionsabroad.com For first-hand accounts and advice, click on “Living Abroad,” then “Reports from Expatriates.”

✱ branchor.com Publisher specializes in books (some for children) on relocation.

✱ easyexpat.com. Country-specific info on taxes, health care systems, work rules and benefits.

✱ expatexchange.com Discussion forums, Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. Searchable archives of a weekly newsletter.

✱ expat-blog.com Directory of blogs, listed by region.

JOB SEARCH

✱ careers.state.gov Foreign Service listings and qualifications; Assignment Abroad videos.

✱ globalgateway.monster.com Sheer volume (400 jobs in Australia) and cluttered interface make it a little cumbersome. But worth a look.

✱ transitionsabroad.com International jobs portals by region, plus dedicated section on teaching English abroad. And see above under Research.

✱ idealist.org Lists jobs at nonprofits and other organizations, by country.

WOMEN’S NETWORKS

✱ expatwomen.com Click on “Networks” for mentors and forums by region.

✱ fawco.org The Federation of American Women’s Clubs Overseas Inc. provides links to over 75 volunteer organizations for U.S. citizens living abroad.



the most delicious part of a family meal is being together.

When families eat meals together on a regular basis, everyone benefits, especially children. Studies show they typically:

- get better grades
- eat healthier foods
- are more likely to discuss serious issues with their parents

In short, the benefits of eating together last long after the meal ends.



Thank you for inviting us to your table.

was looking. It was her supervisor and mentor at NYU who turned up the best lead.

Coss is now running the art therapy program at LaSalle University in Singapore and finding opportunities she couldn't have imagined before. Just weeks after her move, she traveled to Sumatra to do art therapy in an orphanage.

Coss has had her bad moments—getting lost, feeling flummoxed by the local banking system or challenges at work. “I did sit in my office and cry one day, about a month in, but I still didn’t question my decision,” she says.

Not only does she have renewed energy for work, she says her off-hours are also richer. In New York she was frustrated by how her social circle had changed: “Most of my friends were settled and married with kids.” Now she finds that they’re envious of her vacations in Bali or her apartment in Singapore, where she does yoga on the terrace, surrounded by birds and butterflies. She rapidly found a new circle of friends, including other expatriates.

Not that an empty nest is a requirement for relocation. Sally Carr, 47, was determined to move her whole family—husband and two girls—abroad. For years, she had wanted to leave the fast-paced culture of the U.S. and live somewhere very different. And after exiting a big corporate job some years before, she was still trying to create a work life that wouldn’t be based on decisions made in her twenties, Carr says. As an executive coach, she thought she should follow her own advice to pause and figure out what she wanted.

First order of business: persuade her husband, a professional photographer, to move his business. They decided on Ireland in part because Carr’s mother was born there, giving Carr dual citizenship. Then she

started lining up clients for herself. “When you’re so clear about what you want to do,” she says, “I think the stars align.” When she broke the news of her impending move to her largest client, a Philadelphia-based sales training organization, she found an unexpected benefit: The company had a big European operation and needed people with Carr’s specialty. They would have plenty of business for her.

This past summer, Carr and her husband sold their house in New Jersey and found a new home in the village of Kilcrohane, near Bantry, where their girls are enrolled in a two-room schoolhouse. “I’m incredibly proud that I’ve put myself in a situation where I don’t fully know how it’s going to turn out,” Carr says.

Of course, settling into a new job and new country isn’t all romance. Your host city may have a Starbucks on every corner, but everything else—from plugging in your computer to bonding with colleagues—is different. Success hinges on your ability to crack the code.

Dianne Geoghegan turned 40 in London, directing European finance for a large U.S.-based entertainment company. She found she could balance the company’s books just fine—but couldn’t get the lightbulb in her office changed. Her repeated messages to the office maintenance man were ignored. It was when her administrative assistant cajoled him into the office that she saw the error of her ways. As the man worked, the assistant brought him tea and thanked him profusely. Such graciousness, Geoghegan realized, gets things done in London. “I’d still be sitting there in the dark if it wasn’t for her,” she says.

Letting go of the management style, tools and habits that made you successful at home can be a problem



for new expats. "There are a lot of people who have great pedigree and background, but they just can't break that 'this is the way we did it' mentality," says Laura Lee, 50, who worked as a marketing vice president for Pacific Century Cyberworks in Hong Kong. But Lee thinks midlife women who have established a track record and worked through many barriers are well suited for the delicate art of crossing cultures. She's comfortable saying yes to some new experiences (eating the jiggly fried jellyfish at her first business dinner in Tokyo, wearing a kimono to an event celebrating Japanese culture) and no to others (shaving the nape of her neck when she donned that kimono, because, she was told, a shaved nape is considered alluring).

Experienced expats recommend that if you're considering a move, you visit the country first and talk with American women who have lived there. Consider every opportunity, and look at the trade-offs. France isn't "an up-and-coming global business location like India or China, but once you factor in quality of life, it becomes really attractive," says Rebecca Powers, a consultant at Mercer. Conversely, China can be overwhelming, with its high costs, cumbersome travel and extreme pollution. But experience there—or in another emerging giant, such as Brazil, Russia or India—will give you a huge career boost.

Wherever you go, don't stint on research. Emigration, tax and benefits issues are complex. If a company is relocating you, ask whether the employer will cover your income taxes, which are often higher abroad. Also get



London calling? Do your research, then make the leap across the pond.

independent advice. And if you're making a move on your own, you'll need good counsel on many logistical issues.

At the same time, once you suss out the system in your new country, you may look at the U.S. in a new light. When Helen Peters relocated to Munich at age 48, she had recently divorced and was looking for a sense of freedom. From the first day at National Semiconductor, German colleagues taught her a new approach to time management: Work hard on weekdays, but leave the office behind on weekends—and during her six weeks of vacation. "It's a myth that Americans are more productive," she says.

Soft landings (and the occasional crash)

There's no question that going global expands your horizons and opportunities. While in Hong

Kong, Laura Lee was inspired by the women's bold, idiosyncratic fashion and decided to form her own accessories firm, Laura Lee Designs. Now back in the United States, she has operations in Washington, D.C., and Hong Kong and buys materials in Australia, Nepal and Tokyo. Lee says she never would have pulled this off without the connections she made abroad and the experience of "living and breathing the culture of Asia."

But returning can also be the ultimate buzz kill. Whether you're working independently or reporting back to the corporate mother ship, you'll need to reestablish old connections and make new ones. And after flexing your multicultural muscles, you may feel confined or bored. Maybe that's why some women turn right around and head back. "Overseas assignments can become addictive," says Andrea Martins, cofounder of ExpatWomen.com.

Last year Mary Walsh, 47, started her second tour with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration in Singapore. Walsh keeps a house in Cape Cod but isn't sure when she's coming home. She does miss big American cars, malls and movie theaters. But she revels in the Singapore roads, bordered with bougainvilleas; the rain forests, filled with monkeys; and the challenging assignments. It's "a very satisfying life, in which I can continually reinvent myself," she says. Or as Walsh's mother tells friends who ask about her wayward daughter: "She's in Shangri-la." **M**

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