



Q&A INTERVIEW

with
*International Executive
and Author*
Stacie Berdan



On behalf of the members of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), thank you so much for your willingness to take time to speak with us today.

Q: You are a consultant and expert on women and international careers. In addition to your own successful career as a marketing communications executive where you spent several years working in Asia, you have conducted 50 in-depth interviews with other women who have had similar success in their fields. What have you learned from your own experience and that of other female executives regarding learning about other languages and cultures, and getting ahead in international business?

A: Working internationally is probably the single greatest opportunity for women to fast-track their careers. Contrary to assumptions in many companies that women won't do well overseas, women usually excel abroad. Women often possess traits deemed critical in cross-cultural situations, such as "style flexing" through adaptability; skill at building teams and relationships in a nonthreatening way; communication skills such as listening closely to the verbal and intuiting the nonverbal; patience and persistence also known as "grace under pressure;" and an open-minded approach to diverse and different circumstances. These traits, combined with excellent technical skills, can make a woman working overseas a powerful force.

I also learned that there is no right time or best stage in life to go global. Whether an individual is right out of college, a mid-manager, or a senior executive—all have great benefits. Foreign language fluency is also increasingly important. The global business world is changing from one of American and British dominance to one that is truly international, as leading, high-growth companies from China, India, Spain, Brazil, and Russia flex their muscles and become influential players on the global business stage.

There is no doubt in my mind that a professional who has top-notch technical skills along with language proficiency will increasingly be a hot commodity across a wide spectrum of industries. I believe in this so passionately that my twin 10-year-old daughters, who have taken Spanish since kindergarten and will continue through 12th grade at least, also attend Chinese language camp in the summer and will be adding Chinese language in seventh grade and through 12th grade.

Q: During your 15-year career, spent mostly at global communications firm Burson-Marsteller and consumer product company Unilever, you have counseled dozens of senior executives at the world's leading companies, internationally acclaimed nonprofits, and several foreign governments in the area of strategic business communication. There is no doubt that globalization and the use of new technologies have revised the rules for the Millennial generation entering the workforce today. How do you believe having language skills can give a competitive edge to new graduates who wish to pursue business careers?

A: I speak on campuses across the country about the importance of understanding the global marketplace and the benefits of living and working abroad. Within this context, I encourage students to do three things to maximize their career opportunities: (1) pursue a foreign language, (2) study or intern abroad, and (3) work at understanding the international business marketplace—even if students do not consider themselves to be pursuing business careers.

First, mastering a foreign language is more critical to American students today than ever before because they will soon find themselves on the front lines of an increasingly competitive global marketplace, one that offers up talent from around the globe with students who are multilingual: Europeans who usually graduate trilingual; Chinese who speak, arguably, the two most important commercial languages in the world: Mandarin and English; and Latin Americans who often speak Spanish, English and, increasingly, Portuguese.

I emphasize that although foreign language skills may not be mandatory to land an international assignment, they can be a significant differentiator in this overly crowded job market. Mastery of a second language illustrates global awareness, cross-cultural comfort, and the propensity to learning an additional language important to a future employer. Employers want to hire people who are more predisposed to working in a global environment—even if they never leave their U.S.-based offices—because their businesses are global. For those who do head overseas, language skills will enable workers to integrate much faster into the local culture, enriching their experience and their ability to deliver results.

Second, studying or interning abroad ties into foreign language learning as students pursuing fluency are more likely to go abroad for the immersion benefits—and companies value this. Time abroad says that this person thinks a little differently than the average and this creativity might benefit a company, even if they do not plan to transfer him or her overseas. The vast majority of business leaders I asked agree that if two applicants have essentially the same résumé credentials, they would choose the one who studied or interned abroad because they believe the new grad has enhanced cross-cultural awareness critical to diverse global teams, the ability to bring global thinking skills to bear on problems across the board, multiple language skills, and a predisposition to and experience with global mobility.

Third, the global marketplace is directly relevant to all students—not just business majors. No matter the field or technical training, as future employees, students will be affected by business and so the sooner they begin to work at understanding the international business world, the better off they will be.

Q: Along with your co-author, Perry Yeatman, you wrote *Get Ahead by Going Abroad*—a book geared to help individuals land and then make the most of an international working assignment. Why did you wish to address this topic and what are some of the top tips you have to offer to those who wish to work abroad? How do language skills and cultural understanding factor in to success in an international assignment? Can the lack of the skills hamper one's success?

A: Our main objective in writing the book was to highlight the trend that women excel in working abroad and that by doing so, women can fast-track their careers. International experience is a major differentiator because organizations want professionals who think globally but can drive business results locally. Today's new world marketplace presents tremendous opportunities for the savvy professional who actively seeks an international assignment.

During the last 10 years or so, the role of the business manager has morphed into one of an international business leader. Sure, there are still local problems and office-related situations to deal with, but the greater problems and therefore the greater rewards reside in the global economy. How can businesses compete in this global marketplace? For starters, globalization requires international experience. Global experience is best gained by working overseas. Companies with experienced, global managers are in the best position to compete, to survive, and to thrive. As the global business environment becomes more competitive, companies recognize

they need a diverse leadership team and a rich mix of employees with varied perspectives and experiences. Outstanding global talent provides strategic advantages. Companies need professionals who have lived in more than one country and who understand other cultures, languages, economies, geopolitics, and history.

For those interested in an international career, we recommend they first determine if going global is right for them by asking themselves a series of questions, including how well they thrive on diversity, how well they do outside their comfort zone, how they handle failure and many more. Then we recommend many ways to increase the chances of going global, including finding a mentor to serve as coach and advocate, researching target countries and demonstrating cultural awareness and sensitivity, and practicing/learning a foreign language.

Companies can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in sending an employee overseas, so they want to be sure it is a good fit for all concerned. It is important that anyone who wants to go to work abroad understands that it is not all a bed of roses. Yes, it is a thrilling, exciting adventure to live and work in another country, but it may also be the most challenging assignment of one's life.

Q: Earlier this year, you wrote a piece for *The Huffington Post* where you addressed the issue of cuts to foreign language programs in the United States. You say emphatically that “Americans must fight for the need to keep foreign language in the budget as a critical component for our children’s success.” What do you think is the most effective argument that those of us who support language learning can make in our communities and schools to ensure that these vital programs are not threatened? How do we enlist the help of business leaders to help protect language learning programs and achieve our mutually held goals?

A: The United States will lose its competitive edge if our students cannot compete in the global marketplace. In the recent global financial crisis, Americans learned that—for the first time—the so-called developing world surged past the developed world in its share of global GDP. Americans are learning that we can no longer afford to ignore China, Russia, India, or Brazil—most of whose students graduate speaking multiple languages. In a decade or so, when today’s young students enter the workforce, they are as likely to be competing for jobs in and with people from Beijing or Brasilia or Bangalore as from Boston or Baton Rouge. In our ever-shrinking world, global experience, cross-cultural competency, and language proficiency will be critical to career success.

Businesses continue to adapt to the evolving global marketplace by expanding operations internationally, developing a mobile global workforce, and recognizing the importance of cross-cultural competence and proficiency in multiple languages. Educators, therefore, must emphasize internationalism, including playing a leadership role in achieving language proficiency beginning in kindergarten. Educators must identify advocates within the business community, specifically those that operate on a global scale, to make a strong business case for increased language instruction in schools across the United States. Working together, these unlikely partners must hammer home the message to policymakers and parents that language proficiency means more than just being able to read, write, and speak; it also includes cultural knowledge. With the incorporation of culture into the foreign language curriculum, students receive an enhanced level of sociological, political, and historical context. As a result, they become more open-minded to differences, an attitudinal skill which studies show is one of the top skills required by successful internationalists. Moreover, research has shown that multilingualism improves the command of one’s native language, enables greater mastery of tests in math and reading, and opens up more neuropathways for cognitive expansion. In addition to making the brain a better operating machine, it also broadens the mind and enhances cross-cultural awareness.

If our schools are to supply the global employees of tomorrow, big business has a vested interest in helping influence policymakers and decision makers refocus a curriculum that delivers on that need. We must act boldly, for the stakes are high and rising.