

## The International Assignment: Is it for You?

You may have given an international opportunity consideration from time to time in your career. You've likely seen opportunities advertised and wondered "what if?". You've heard of other lawyers who have landed international opportunities and who, after getting through the first difficult year, are extremely positive about their experience and who have thrived as a result of the change. Would you?

We spoke with a few of these Canadian ex-pat's, four in-house lawyers currently working in other countries, and one who has returned to Canada after a seven-year stint in London (UK), to hear about their respective challenges and experiences. We discussed how they originally found their positions as well as the effect it had on their professional and personal lives. What we found, not surprisingly, was that while some perspectives and experiences are different in many ways, others resonate.



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President

### Why? & How?

The individuals who generously shared their time and candour with us indicated that, though they had a similar objective, a position abroad, the path they set out on to reach it was not necessarily the same.

*Margaret McDonald* (currently Sr. Counsel at Computer Services Corporation in Melbourne Australia), for instance, first made a personal decision to move to a new country, confident that her skill set would lead to employment in her new location. Upon arrival in Australia, Margaret studied for her accreditation exams and took a contract legal job that ultimately led to her current role.

*John Irving*, currently Vice President, General Counsel & Secretary of CP Ships, also made a leap of faith exploring Dublin, Ireland and London, England on a scouting trip following the sale of his Canadian employer in early 2001. After meeting many people in London he returned to Canada and was soon contacted regarding the position he now holds. As a Canadian lawyer, John is uniquely qualified to head up legal for CP Ships, headquartered in London but trading on the Toronto Stock Exchange.

International opportunities can also arise through good, old-fashioned networking of friends and contacts. At the urging of a former law school classmate to consider a position in Bermuda, *Jeff Cameron*, formerly of Ottawa, parlayed a career in private practice litigation to an in-house position where shorts are considered business attire. He is now the Associate Legal Counsel with Trout Trading Management Company Ltd., in sunny Bermuda and is enjoying a highly challenging career in securities and derivatives.

Seven years of work in the United Kingdom with Coca-Cola Limited (CCL) was the fulfilment of *Scott Ewart's* desire to be part of the action in Europe during the significant changes of the 1990's. Currently the Sr. VP, General Counsel & Secretary at A T & T Canada, in 1989 Scott was working at CCL and marketed himself internally, letting it be known that he wanted to be part of the European team. His experience began at CCL Great Britain & Ireland and expanded to all of Northwest Europe.

*Pierre Morin*, a Canadian lawyer Called in Quebec, obtained a position with World Bank in 1991, which has taken him throughout Francophone West-Africa. Pierre's work has involved the supervision of projects as Nations design and implement development projects funded by the World Bank in partnership with investment banks. Since 1999, as part of an exchange partnership between the World Bank and the private sector, Pierre has been with Landwell, the legal firm that is part of Price Waterhouse Coopers, in Paris France. Pierre is passionate about his work and is driven by making a difference to the individuals and ultimately the populations he touches.

### **Impact on the Family**

Moving across town can be challenging, across Canada stressful, but moving to a new country is quite another thing and it is clear that, if one has family, it has to be a family decision.

For John and Scott and their respective spouses the move included a conscious decision that their children experience life in another country. Scott can now reflect back on a true gift his children have experienced, now teens they have had the experience to understand that "things are not better or worse (in other countries) they're just different". The international experience offers children and adults alike a unique perspective that they would otherwise not acquire, they develop a deeper understanding of the world around them and a quality that makes them different and, hopefully, better people as a result.

The international assignment cannot be successfully navigated without a solid family foundation. The move puts a strain on everyone and all indications are that the first year can be tough. Adjustments are difficult; and the isolation can get to you. Without a clear grasp on who you are, what is important to you and your family, and agreement on what you are **all** prepared to compromise in order to make it, you may not survive.

John indicated a smaller house; a longer commute; a single car and a single income as some of the adjustments his family made when they moved from Vancouver to London last summer. However, John and his family believe that those compromises are more than offset by the English and European experience he and his wife and children are enjoying.

Conversely, Pierre indicated that he could never have had the career he has had if he had a family. He indicated extensive travel and long periods of time away from loved ones are difficult conditions, "It is a very interesting life but you must be built for it". Pierre advised that while he has not had the same economic rewards as his contemporaries, who chose a different legal career, "the luxury of doing the work you love is a great reward".

## **Educating Your Children**

When undertaking a career away from your native home, a number of considerations must be made. Education for your children is always a priority and finding the right education system in a completely new environment can be daunting. Most ex-pats use the American International Schools that support diplomatic and expatriate communities around the world. The curriculum is consistent from location to location and you will have the benefit of consistent scheduling for your children – key to providing them with the travel and cultural experiences available to you without compromising their education.

## **Personal Life Impact**

The international experience is permeated with cultural challenges that can be both personally and professionally rewarding. The North American work paradigm does not work outside of its own context – whether that is EU, Australia, or Africa. You will find out quickly in that, though you can be briefed (if you are lucky), you can never be prepared for what your experience will be or how it will unfold. The key to a successful transition is to listen. Listening, simply put will provide the facts that will ultimately lead to knowledge and understanding. As Scott said “business people all over the world can get to the same place – they just get there differently”. Pierre certainly agreed and went further to say that to understand, you must put yourself in the shoes of the native populous in order to get any indication of their perspective.

Patience, particularly during your own learning period, combined with a focus on your goals is key to successful business interaction. Professionally, a significant move can cut you off from your network in the business community, out of sight is out of mind, unless you work at maintaining those relationships. Those relationships may be key to your successful return to business in Canada one day and therefore should not be neglected.

In your personal realm and social life, you should not anticipate to be embraced or rejected as an Expatriate. Your friendships will tend to grow around your work, your children’s school and/or their activities. Work friendships are fragile and don’t tend to have staying power when you move on. If you move to a location where you already know a few people, you may feel like an interloper, dependant on your friends and their friends until you develop a network of your own.

While your own family may strengthen significantly as you rely on each other for support and entertainment, particularly in the early stages, you’re relationship with your extended family could strain. Distanced by thousands of miles, the ties that bind may not. Even when you are able to visit you may find that your frame of reference and that of your extended family and friends in Canada is now different and your relationships constrained. The antidote? Listen and learn. Open your mind.

## **Conclusions**

So, to make the move or not? As Scott Ewart said – “it’s a balance sheet”. All of the personal challenges, and compromises, as well as the benefits and opportunities need

to be identified and put in “the basket”. The professional risks and rewards, too, need to be identified and put in “the basket”. Look at the entire balance sheet and if the positives outweigh the negatives – go for it. As Pierre said “ you have to be built for it” so know yourself and your family before you take on an international role.



### Epilogue

Without exception, the contributors to this article have no regrets. They highly recommend an international experience, particularly for young Canadian lawyers. It opens your mind and broadens your view of the world and puts business and law into a global context.

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