

Do You Have the Global Skillset?

by Donald Asher

Colleges are doing more than ever to increase the global sophistication of their students. For example, although it is located far from any national border The University of Tennessee has adopted the motto, "Ready for the World." Their MBAs are required to conduct a major team project abroad, and plans are underway for undergraduates to have a similar requirement. Duke University launched DukeEngage in 2007, a program that actually funds students to get involved in service activities all around the globe. Rollins College now requires *faculty* to travel abroad once every three years, to increase their knowledge of the world and, presumably, to transfer their increased global sophistication to their students in class. Sally Blount-Lyon, dean of the NYU Stern School of Business Undergraduate College, recently wrote a much-noticed editorial for InsideHigherEd.com arguing "International Study Shouldn't Be Elective." According to the Forum on Education Abroad, 75% of member institutions are actively trying to increase the number of students they send abroad, in spite of the economic downturn.

So what are these students supposed to be gaining from this exposure to other cultures? Some ability to be effective in the new world economy, an economy driven by technology and borderless organizations, one may presume. In this generation, even workers who never leave Peoria, Illinois, may have colleagues in The Philippines or Singapore or Peru with whom they have to work on a daily basis.

These new workers will need a more global skillset than the one required by their predecessors. In an attempt to learn exactly what that skillset might look like, I went out and found people who have been successful in assignments all over the world, and asked their opinion. First, you have to let go of your preconceptions of the place and culture you are going to visit, says Bradley A. Feuling, CEO of Kong and Allan, a logistics consulting firm with offices in the U.S. and in Shanghai, China. "I see that many people from more developed countries still see international work as bringing their lifestyle abroad, as opposed to allowing their lifestyle to be influenced by their abroad surroundings," observes Mr. Feuling, who chooses to be based in China.

He recommends that you set aside your expectations, and find a strong local partner and teacher to help you learn about the new culture and its business practices. "I would argue that a new skillset is developing, which is crosscultural and multi-geographical project management. This applies to global managers who are overseeing functions in multiple parts of the world. Here a complexity is added, that makes a person's adaptability and flexibility more dynamic," he continues. "These individuals must have strong project management skills *and* diverse cultural knowledge."

Michael D. Babbitt concurs. About to leave on assignment to Asia with a multinational bank, he has worked before in Spain, Mexico, Canada, Guatemala, Panama, Thailand, Ireland, Belgium, and The Netherlands in stints lasting from two years to one week. He cautions that protocols can get subtle, and may be counterintuitive. First of all, never assume that people in the room don't speak English, even if they use an interpreter. And you have to be very sensitive to who is on home turf and who is a guest,

and who is selling and who is acting as a customer. “There definitely are nuances, things you do differently,” he says. “For example, you don’t bow to someone outside of Asia, even when meeting an Asian, unless you know them and have a history with them, in which case you may exchange bows. It gets complicated.”

Mr. Babbitt believes the days when Americans could ignore local customs and fail to prepare for international travel are over. “America is great,” he says, “but the rest of the world is catching up, and if you want to do business with other people, you have to speak and interact in a respectful way. This is critical to having successful actions in business and in private, when you’re abroad.” While working for an international bank, Mr. Babbitt spent three weeks preparing for each one-week trip. “If you are calling on them in their country, you are expected to know something about their culture and how things are done. I would look at the local market, and know which executives and whom I was to call on. It was more than just cultural preparation. I was getting ready to build relationships.”

Language skills are also key, says Babbitt, who became fluent in Spanish, and taught himself some local words and phrases wherever he was assigned.

Samir Prakash Sahoo also believes languages are the ultimate key to international success. Now an MBA student in the Midwest, he was most recently a marine engineer for Chevron’s international tanker fleet. “Officers were Italian, Danish, Scandinavian, Filipino, Turkish, British, Indian, or Asian, and the crew was usually Indian and Filipino. There were always a lot of languages on the boat, but English was the official language, even for the crew.” In spite of that, languages were critical for success *off* the boat. He had to engage with suppliers, engineers, and technical consultants in Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, China, Mexico, Indonesia, Malaysia, and South Africa, where conversations might start in English and then veer off into any of a dozen languages.

“You can do business anywhere in the world. You just need to learn a few languages, such as Spanish, French, Italian, or Chinese—at least Spanish and Chinese, and maybe French,” says Mr. Sahoo. Some might add Arabic and Japanese to this list. “Obviously you have to be fluent in English. Apart from that, you should be tolerant of different cultures, and have a strong curiosity to learn. You can’t impose your own culture on others. You can observe and pick up a lot by interacting with other people. It’s very exciting. [People] are very different in their living and working styles. I think you have to read about others’ cultures, have a foundation of how people live and think in different areas of the world. Then, I would say that someone falls into the category of being a person who would find it very easy to do business anywhere in the world.”

So how would you get started building a global skillset? First, you need to become business proficient in a market language. Take two or more years of foreign language. Study abroad for a full semester, not just a short “exposure” experience. Get an internship abroad, if you can at all, and then try very, very hard to get an offshore assignment for your first job out of college. A search on “internships abroad” will turn up over half a million opportunities. To learn about transnational opportunities and foreign hiring practices, the best place to go is www.goinglobal.com, a web site run by Mary Anne Thompson, who is

also the author of *The Global Resume and CV Guide* and a companion series, *Going Global Career Guides*. Also, to find the U.S. headquarters of foreign companies, use the *Directory of Foreign Firms Operating in the United States*. To find the offshore headquarters of U.S. based multinationals, use the *Directory of American Firms Operating in Foreign Countries*.

It's a brave new world out there, and your best future may be borderless.

BIO:

Donald Asher is the author of eleven books on careers and higher education, including *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays* (the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process); *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named 2008 Business Book of the Year); *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; and *The Overnight Resume: Fastest Way to Your Next Job*. He speaks at over 100 colleges and universities annually on career topics. He welcomes your comments at don@donaldasher.com or see his web site at www.donaldasher.com. © 2010 Asher Associates.