



## **Season 2, Episode 4 – The Study Abroad Path to a Global Career**

**Claire Meyer, Consultant, Business Performance Institute (BPI) - Milan, Italy**  
**Stacie Berdan, International Careers Expert (Podcast Host)**

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### **Stacie Berdan:**

Welcome to the Global Careers Podcast sponsored by GW-CIBER!

THE source for inspiring stories from seasoned professionals who have embraced a global role and reaped the benefits. We offer practical advice and insider tips across a broad swath of industries and fields around the world. Whether or not you've considered moving abroad or taking on an international role, globalization will impact your career. So join us for a lively discussion as we explore what an international career really means. My name is Stacie Nevadomski Berdan and I'll be your host!

In Season 2 we find ourselves in a fast-changing world still affected by the pandemic where we must adapt to succeed. Come with us as we share with you how to craft your place in the new global workspace.

Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Claire Meyer, a Consultant at Business Performance Institute in Milan, Italy. Claire is relatively new to this position, but she has spent many years studying and working in Europe. Although Claire grew up in St. Louis, she opted to study abroad in Spain for her undergraduate degree in International Business and then went on to complete her MBA in SDA Bocconi in Milan, with a semester abroad in China. Claire speaks Italian, Spanish, and English, and has been passionate about having a global career for as long as she can remember. Welcome Claire, I'm so excited to have you on to discuss your global journey so far!

### **Claire Meyer:**

Thank you Stacie, it's great to be here today.

### **Stacie Berdan:**

Great, let's get started! So, one of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the global careers and pathways that are out there. You are currently working in Milan – tell us about your journey, as well as what you do now, your role with BPI.

### **Claire Meyer:**

Sure. So, as you said, my name is Claire Meyer and I'm a consultant at Business Performance Institute in Milan. So this is really a boutique European consulting company and we work on projects that are focused mainly on learning and development. So what we do is we design custom what we call 'learning journeys' for major multinational healthcare companies. So definitely very dynamic and interesting work. You may be wondering how a girl from the Midwest ended up in Milan, Italy. So, I'm 30 now; I think this goes back to when I was 19 and I actually stepped on a plane to go be an exchange student in Sardinia, Italy, and I ultimately went to do four years in Madrid, Spain to do my undergraduate in International Business. I went back to the US to work for a few years and then came back to Europe in 2019 to do my MBA in SDA Bocconi in Milan. So, it's been a super crazy, winding, you know, international journey, but very happy to be here today to share more about it.

### **Stacie Berdan:**

It's wonderful. So, for the students who are interested in the path you've taken, right, pursuing a global career starting with undergraduate study abroad – what are the benefits of that – studying abroad as a stepping stone to working abroad?



**Claire Meyer:**

Absolutely, yeah. I think, just to summarize some of the experiences I've had – I did spend those four years in Madrid as a student and then I also did an internship in Qatar, I did my MBA in Milan. And as you said in the introduction, I did a semester in China. So I'm fortunate to have had quite a few different experiences. I think there are a couple of different benefits in terms of studying and interning abroad and then being able to work abroad. One, it's just kind of a snowball effect – I think a lot of times international employers feel much more comfortable employing someone who has experience living abroad and who has already proved that they were able to adapt to different environments. I think... the second thing that I would point out is I think specifically when it comes to being able to work abroad I think the most effective education tool that I found... you know, my experience was really the MBA. One, because the MBA itself is an extremely pragmatic degree, it's really just an excellent pipeline to employers in general, but also especially to international employers if you do your MBA abroad. You know, these employers, I would say, you know, as opposed to just hiring someone out of the blue, employers who are specifically recruiting MBAs are much more willing I would say to sponsor you, and they have a dedicated kind of recruitment process or programs in place to do so. So, you know through my MBA I saw people go on to work in almost every industry. The typical ones you see are consulting, finance, then also tech, healthcare, food and beverage... So I think, you know, especially for those Americans that, you know, who want to go work in Europe for example, I think getting an MBA is a really smart move, and I saw a lot of... both myself and then other non-Europeans making the transition that would lead to Europe through the MBA program.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's really interesting. How easy / difficult... what's the process for applying to an MBA program, particularly in Italy but anywhere in Europe, if you know?

**Claire Meyer:**

Yeah, it's a really good question, Stacie. I would say more or less I would give about a year to kind of prep the application because you do a couple of different things before an MBA . One is you just research the schools; you know, there's quite a lot of different schools and different personalities of schools, and it's good to really familiarize yourself with each of them. But then, two, you have to go through an MBA application process in terms of taking the GMAT, so that takes quite a bit of time I would say – three to five months of prep specifically for that. You have to tailor all the essays, you have to get letters of recommendation... you know, in some cases you are able to go visit the school – I think this is often recommended. So, it is quite a lengthy process but I think it's all worth it.

**Stacie Berdan:**

And were your classes in English or Italian at SDA Bocconi?

**Claire Meyer:**

My classes were in English! There was a lot of chitter-chatter in Italian in the hallways, because our cohort of about... we had a cohort of about 100 students and I would say about 30 of them were Italian, so there was definitely a lot of, you know, small talk in Italian, but the actual classes were in English.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's good. So students interested in this path, not only at the university you attended but many across Europe, it's my understanding too that they are done in English. So they can apply, they can take the time, and then of course – study the language while they are there too. Not only understand the chit-chat but really to understand the benefits. But, you mentioned that you graduated in 2019, so you proceeded in 2019 before the pandemic hit. How feasible is it for students today do you think to take a similar path?

**Claire Meyer:**

I think it's still quite feasible. It's funny, I was actually back at SDA Bocconi the other day as part of our welcome opening ceremony and I was talking with a recruiter there and she said actually applications have gone up because



of the pandemic. I think a lot of times, because of the pandemic people are rethinking their priorities and looking to go back to education, and kind of reposition themselves. So I don't think it's off, I don't think it's something that has become... I don't know, I think there's still a lot of opportunities to go and do this abroad. I would say that for those that were kind of at the height of the pandemic it was really tough because obviously one of the biggest values of the MBA is just networking and getting to hang out with your classmates, and getting to travel, even to go to events. So, I think that was really, really tough at the height of the pandemic, but now, fingers crossed, we are at a place where people can more comfortably apply knowing that more or less Bocconi, for example, is back full swing. They do have a couple of hybrid experiences built in, but for the most part they are back face to face.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's great to know, wonderful. So, as a consultant, what skills are critical for new hires or people entering your field?

**Claire Meyer:**

Yes, absolutely. I think in consulting, this might sound obvious, but just kind of general digital literacy – especially when it comes to Excel and PowerPoint (those are the two biggest tools that we are drawing on). I think specifically for strategy consulting you really need to have strong financial acumen and ability to do financial modeling – that's very important. I would say also...you know, another thing that's very important is just critical thinking, the ability to analyze problems, the ability to pull up the 'so what' of an analysis I would say is extremely important. And then I think, you know something else that might not be immediately obvious is just stakeholder management and engagement, I would say. Having a high-level EQ is important, because you are dealing with, you know, you are dealing with a lot of different players both on your team but then on the client's team, they have a lot of different demands. And I think you need to be able to, you know, to manage those, to be able to negotiate with them a little bit and also to make sure that you are fully satisfying them. So those are what I have observed in a consultant role.

**Stacie Berdan:**

It's interesting. Are there any... so you gave a nice mix of soft skills as well as technical skills, but are there any skills that stand out as particularly important to working internationally? Or even studying internationally, because... let's take it beyond for our listeners.

**Claire Meyer:**

Yeah, I think a couple of things. I think one kind of goes back to stakeholder engagement more in terms of I would say a level of emotional intelligence and sensitivity I think is really important in a super international environment. Also being able to really tailor your message to the different audiences you are with and recognizing what for example a non-native English speaker would understand from your speech pattern and things like that I think is very important. And I would add resilience – I think obviously you're going to be put in a lot of different situations you are not necessarily comfortable in or that you hadn't experienced before and just being able to kind of, you know, being able to adapt to those I think is really important. And I think, the only other point I would add is I think that there are ways to kind of become more internationally literate so to speak, or more multicultural, even by staying home, right. You know, you can go to a different restaurant, you can watch different films on Netflix, things like that. I think I saw that a lot with my classmates. So there were a lot of Italian classmates that I had that I felt were borderline American and they had just spent tons of time trying to familiarize themselves with American culture while watching Netflix online, you know, trying to connect with Americans that were living in Italy. So I do think there are some ways to do this already just wherever you are currently based.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Right, that's a great point. And of course internet opens up tons of opportunities for all kinds of things, even learning a language online, although nothing beats full immersion, but that's a great tip.



I want to go back to the emotional intelligence – that must be really difficult to do. It's one thing to do it within your own culture, to understand all the cues... Is it really much more difficult to do in another culture where you don't really understand everything, it doesn't come to you as naturally? How does that play out?

**Claire Meyer:**

Yeah, I think it's a fair call out. I think this is kind of something you want to develop with practice truthfully. When I think back to my MBA – on day 1 I was put in a group with someone from India, someone from Italy, someone from Poland, someone from Iran, and someone from Greece. And I think truthfully there was a lot of butting heads and questioning and uncertainty... I think, by working with that group over time I learned to develop more sensitivity and awareness to these different cultures, these different backgrounds. And I think that's it's something that's hard to develop until you are really put into situations to practice and develop it. But yeah, I do view that as a very important skill to have.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's interesting, that's really interesting. So some of the trends, workplace trends that have emerged in the past year – remote work, hybrid schedules, new applications for tech across all fields... Tell me Claire, what have you seen, what have you experienced, and how will this trends affect the future of work?

**Claire Meyer:**

Sure. I mean, I think Stacie, to be totally honest, I think one trend I'm very, very excited about is this increased trend of working from anywhere, the WFA trend I think is really, really exciting. So, just to give you a little bit of a flavor – back in 2020 when the pandemic hit I was based in Switzerland working for Anheuser-Busch InBev out of my MBA, but during that period of COVID I went to work for four months from Milan, I went to work for three months from my home town of St. Louis, and then two months in Sardinia where my partner is based. And I also had friends that were based all over the world and were kind of taking advantage of the situation. I had another friend from the US who actually worked remotely for an American company but took advantage of Croatia's new Digital Nomad visa and went to work from Croatia. So I think this work from anywhere trend is super exciting. For crazy people like me that have their lives kind of spread out across different countries I think it's really, really exciting and opens a lot of opportunities. I would say, just from my point of view, the one piece of advice I would have connected to working from anywhere is kind of two-fold. One would be to really find ways to stay connected both to your local communities wherever you're working abroad but then also to your employer. I think that there's a little bit of a risk working from anywhere that you just become kind of a nomadic tourist and you kind of miss out on a lot of opportunities to connect and really fully, like you said earlier, fully immerse yourself in the culture, right. And then I think, on the other hand, with your employer, I do think it remains very important to get some sort of face time, whether it's travelling once a year to meet with them or finding some creative ways to connect online. I think that's really important in terms of finding sponsors, and learning from your superiors. So, big picture – very excited about work from anywhere but just with a couple of notes of caution there.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, that's really... I'm glad you put the notes of caution, because... and getting the sponsorship, because that matters. I think some people think that you can just pick up and do it anywhere, without actually necessarily telling your employer. But your employer needs to know because they've got compliance issues, they've got payroll taxes, they've got laws, they've got things they've got to follow... So, you really do need to let your employer in on the fact that you are no longer may be down the street in St. Louis, that you are actually in Croatia or Beijing or Costa Rica or somewhere. But it is super exciting, I would personally love to pick up and do that at this moment... maybe I just will!

Looking a little further into the future – what kinds of global trends do you see emerging in the coming years, you know, that our listeners, people entering the workforce need to be aware of and prepare for?



### **Claire Meyer:**

Yeah, absolutely. I think, you know, when I reflect a little bit on my own career, obviously it's been a winding, dynamic, international career, but I think ultimately the space that I am most interested working at is kind of the intersection of business and impact. And when I think back to 2014, I did an internship at the US Chamber of Commerce Corporate Citizenship Center and that was really very, very nascent... you know, corporate social responsibility – it was just a budding field at the time. I think over the past seven to eight years what we've seen is just an explosion of impact-focused careers. And I think it's interesting just for a second to comment on sustainability careers – that's a topic I'm quite interested in. Out of my MBA, I went to work for Anheuser-Busch InBev in Procurement and Sustainability as part of their global leadership program, and while I was there, the Head of Sustainability who I was reporting to... our Procurement officer actually was promoted to have a seat at the CEO's table, right, she was promoted to be the Chief Sustainability Officer. So, I think, with time what we've seen is sustainability has moved from more of a communications role to now being really integrated into all different business functions. And I think with that, for sustainability professionals you see a lot of specialization happening – so it's no longer just "I am a sustainability professional" but "I am sustainability plus procurement / sustainability plus supply chain / sustainability plus finance..." So I think there is a really interesting opportunity there for people to specialize. You know, I think if I could go back and start my career from scratch, I think I would've maybe done a little but more of a deep dive on sustainability, because I think that is an area that, again, will no longer be a nice to have but will continue to become more and more built into the DNA of companies. And I think it's really exciting.

### **Stacie Berdan:**

That's great, yeah, I agree with you. Super exciting, and glad for that tip there – I was going to ask you, how students can do this, but you said take a deep dive into something that's interesting to them. So, it could be sustainability, it could be diversity, it could be any types of impact / issues that somebody is interested in, right?

### **Claire Meyer**

Yeas, absolutely. I mean, I think... obviously, I did my MBA so the MBA is unique that it is more of a general degree, but I do think it's worth students taking some time to think through really where they want to go with their careers and whether that MBA is more suitable or they really want to do something more specific – in which case I would strongly recommend something much more granular, specifically when it comes to sustainability. Something much more specialized, you know, whether it's those other fields that I mentioned or like you said something even not just environmental sustainability but something broader in terms of just general impact. So I think... I don't know... For me it was very exciting to start in 2014 talking, let's say, about CSR as more of a fringe issue, and now more and more just becoming such a key and central to different business. I think it's really exciting.

### **Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, I can attest to the fact that CSR was fringe, and actually not even fringe when I did it 20-25 years ago. It was just like a vision, a mission statement you put on the wall, and that's about it. You know, cause-related marketing effect, that's it. But now it has revolutionized companies, and not only with their output that I see, but also to attract new hires, right. Because it's really an important aspect of hiring for companies and organizations to attract top talent. Because that matters to people. So great, awesome...

Claire, you have pursued internationalized stuff from the get-go, which... I'm just thrilled to read about your story and to talk with you. But you know, probably better than I do, that not everybody believes or even understands the value of the global mindset, let alone picking up and doing an undergraduate and graduate and working all over the world, moving all over the place all the time... Some students maybe saying "You know, that's not for me. Sure, I want a global job but I want to be based in X city in the US and travel a lot." That's not necessarily what globalization is all about, right? So what do you say to people when they say "Why did you do it?" or "Oh, you are throwing your career away maybe..." What advice do you have for students on what role globalization will play in their careers?



**Claire Meyer:**

Yeah, I mean, you are 100% spot on. It's kind of, whether you want it or not, globalization will play a role in all careers. I think, if there's anything we've seen during the pandemic is how interconnected we all are, right, and how interconnected supply chains are, and networks are... So I do think it's really important for people to – obviously I'm biased – but to go and get those experiences abroad whenever possible, I think it's really important. I think, kind of a specific call-out for students, I think if anyone is on the fence on going abroad I would just like to underline the unique position that you are in as a student, and to really take advantage of that, right? So when you are a student, I think you are able, for example, to reach out to people who are abroad, and to have conversations with them. To say, hey, you are a GW alumni based in Shanghai, I'd like to have a conversation with you. I would say people are much more willing to open a door to a student than they are to just another colleague or peer. I think the other thing is there is a lot of, there are a lot of programs that are specifically designed either for college students or for immediately post-college students, so there are a lot of Government programs like Fulbright, there are a lot of really cool international Master's programs that are actually based abroad through international universities. And again, I think it's just important to educate yourself on these programs. I think that's one thing I've heard a lot it's just... you know, when I talk with people about my exchange experience in Italy people say "Oh, I didn't even know you could do that", "I didn't know that was out there". So I think it's really important to use this kind of precious time as a student and really research what's out there. And then I would just say again, in case anyone is on the fence, that I think it's good to go early, to plant the seed, because I think a life goes on things die down, right. My dad has always said that life is like concrete and it starts to settle over time. And I think I feel, when I look back on my career, I'm just so grateful that I had the opportunity to go abroad at such a young age. It was really a pivotal turning point in my life, right. So, definitely pro- international experiences. And I think you are totally right – to be prepared for this kind of inevitable globalization that is just exploding. It's important to have these kind of experiences whenever possible.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Wonderful, thanks for sharing that. You've given some great advice so far. Is there a piece of advice you wish you'd been given, or that you'd like to give your younger self? What are some of the lessons?

**Claire Meyer:**

Yes, absolutely. I think two things. One is just to embrace your path... You know, when I was getting on a plane to go to Italy a lot of my friends were going off to college and having different experiences and I think it's really easy to play the comparison game, especially at that young age. And I think to just, you know, just embrace the winding path. I would say two, this is a more pragmatic piece of advice and this is actually something I got from Theresa Dunn, who was the Director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Qatar when I was interning there. She told me "Claire, if you're going to have an international career as an expat, open up a Roth IRA now." Again, maybe it's too pragmatic, but I think it's important to know that if you are an expat you are probably not going to be contributing for example to a 401K, or you may not have access to the same schemes as someone living and based in the US. So I think that it's important to kind of educate yourself on the financial aspect as well.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's really an excellent advice, thank you for that! Because we often gloss over the practical / pragmatic ones such as that. In some countries in which we can work, there are these forced savings if you will, but sometimes you cannot access them until you hit a certain age, and then you have to follow the laws and everything, and languages, so it's important, I like that. Great, thanks for that!

**Claire Meyer:**

Absolutely.



**Stacie Berdan:**

So, excite us – tell us what is it like to be living in Italy, in Milan?

**Claire Meyer:**

Yeah, it's a good question. I think it's fun, I think I feel very lucky because I have this awesome network of colleagues and classmates from my MBA that I'm still very much in touch with and seeing on a daily and weekly basis. I think, for me, I'm kind of a vegetarian but also a foodie, so for me Italy is basically a paradise, and I think I love just the easy access to great food, great wine, great vintage clothes... It is really fun to be based in Italy. I think, maybe just to call on a specific experience, I spent actually the Halloween weekend in a little city called Alba. So they have the yearly truffle festival there, and we also went during my MBA and we went back this past year and we did what we called Albaween and just enjoyed again good food, good wine, and had a little Halloween party there. So, it's been really good, I think, for me – being a girl from St. Louis, MO – I continue to pinch myself when having these types of experiences. And just feel very grateful to get to continue to live and work abroad. So, yeah...it's been a great journey.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's wonderful. Well, you made it happen! You made it happen for yourself, which is terrific. So, kudos to you. I can talk to you for hours, I'm sure, but... Before we wrap up Claire, is there anything else you want to add, that you want to share to make sure that our listeners take away.

**Claire Meyer:**

I think I touched on a lot. I guess my comment is I'm always happy to be a sounding board, so anyone – please feel free to reach out to me on LinkedIn. Like I said, for me it's been a great journey, and I'm happy to continue to share my experience and also to advise others who are interested in taking this crazy, winding international path, so feel free to reach out. And I think, Stacie, I want to say a big Thanks to you – I think it's really an awesome resource that students can have and something I definitely wish I could have had back in my student days, so thank you for putting this together!

**Stacie Berdan:**

And thanks to GW. And for anyone interested in getting in touch with Claire, her LinkedIn profile is on the GW website where you have access to the podcast. Thanks Claire, it's been terrific, wonderful talking with you. I really appreciate taking the time.

**Claire Meyer:**

Thank you Stacie!

[Music]

**Stacie Berdan:**

You have been listening to the GW-CIBER Global Careers podcast. Join us again next time, and in the meantime – go global!