



Season 4, Episode 3 – Working Abroad in the UAE

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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 four we travel around the world exploring what it's like working abroad in some of the hottest industries and best countries for advancing your career. Come with us as we journey through rich and diverse cultures and deepen our understanding of the expat experience.

Today we're heading to the United Arab Emirates to hear from Brian Lott, Chief Communications Officer of Mubadala Investment Company. Based in Abu Dhabi, Brian is responsible for the stewardship of the Mubadala brand and management of the group's corporate communications requirements around the world. He has worked in the communications industry for over 30 years starting his career in Washington DC, moving on to Europe, and now in the Middle East. He speaks French, Italian, and German, and is Chair of the Arthur W. Page Society, the organization representing the world's top communicators. Welcome Brian, it is such a pleasure to have you with us today.

Brian Lott:

It is great to join you, thank you very much!

Stacie Berdan:

Great! So we're going to get started with the top question which is: what do you do? Provide a sense of the career that you actually have had and have now.

Brian Lott:

So I'm the chief communications officer for Mubadala. We're based in Abu Dhabi and we're owned by the Abu Dhabi government. Abu Dhabi is in the United Arab Emirates, sort of centrally located in the Middle East, around the Arabian Gulf, and I manage a global team of communicators who work both for Mubadala and around 100 of our portfolio companies in different parts of the world. And we cover different specialties, as you can imagine, internal and external comms, including media relations. We have a significant digital and production capabilities, you can imagine. We do sponsorships and events and quite a bit of... let's call it public affairs and investor relations, particularly in those markets where that kind of stakeholder engagement is important.

Stacie Berdan:

So you said you have a global team, does that mean you have, your team members are spread out all over the world?



Brian Lott:

They are. They're both Mubadala Group communications members, so we've got team members in the US and in Europe, but we also work very closely with our portfolio companies, some of which actually carry the Mubadala name, like Mubadala Capital or Mubadala Energy, and they are located some of them in Abu Dhabi but many of them in different parts of the planet. And so, one thing that the last couple of years has really reinforced is the importance of staying close to them using a lot of these new virtual capabilities that have brought us closer together as a team not physically but using technology, which is great.

Stacie Berdan:

And so, this is a really... I mean, really interesting career that you've had so far, so much of it of course working globally in the communications industry as you just shared with us now. Can you share with us a couple of highlights, you know, some things that you're maybe most proud of or most interesting along the way?

Brian Lott:

Yeah, I mean it's been an unusual journey. We'll talk about that – from where I started to how I got here – but one of the things, as I evolved in my career, that has been consistent is my desire to make a difference in where I work and how I apply my time. And, you know, having an impact, trying to make the world a better place at a very difficult time in this century is really important to me. And I really felt that, as I started my career in public service on Capitol Hill, I certainly felt that when I left the Hill to go work at Burson Marsteller, and I feel it now in a company that is helping a nation that is barely 50 years old trying to figure out not just its way in the world but a leadership role, and so that sense of impact and purposes is really important to me and I think will carry on wherever and whenever I go somewhere next.

Stacie Berdan:

Can you give us some examples of ways that you think you've made a difference?

Brian Lott:

Yeah, there's an immediate example here, which is, you know it's a young country, there is not a communications legacy or history that is old like we have in the western world - a long standing tradition of academic programs around journalism and mass communication that have helped people understand what that science is. And here we've got some local institutions, *i.e.*, university and others that are really starting to focus on what does it mean to be a communicator in the modern world. And for a company like Mubadala, and I'm proud to say that, you know, 2/3 of my team are citizens of the country, they're Emiratis, and they've really become world-class communicators. And so helping them understand our place in the world and what modern communications incorporating everything that we do today – digital, and the importance of language, and how executives can and should communicate – is really new, it's a new discipline. And so, through both the Middle Eastern Public Relations Association and through Page, and through what we do is Mubadala helping that new generation become amazing at what they do, and they are amazing, has been really one point of pride for me. I think the second is just... you know, I'm an American and I have found that our reputation around the world sometimes lives up to what we do, which is that we tend to think of the US as the most important place on the planet and the country where everything was invented, and of course we know that that's not always the case. And so, trying to be more global in a perspective that incorporates the significantly larger countries of population – China and India and Brazil – and understanding that there are points of view that are very different than the American point of view, not that ours is any less valid... but that you really have to be a global thinker in today's world where information travels so quickly. And bringing global perspective is one of the reasons why I eventually left the US to look at a career internationally, because I think that's only going to become more important as we go forward in trying to tackle some of the world's biggest problems.



Stacie Berdan:

I love both the points, first that communication is so incredibly important, no matter what we do. So, bravo to you for the difference you're making there I think that's fantastic. It sounds so exciting, and having a global mindset - absolutely necessary. So what you've described in your job and, actually, where you are right now, is fascinating to me, and leaving the US in order to actually help make a difference... How did you get where you are now?

Brian Lott:

Well, part of it was, at a young age (and this is why I found languages to be kind of interesting and important to me), I studied French in high school, then French, Italian, and Spanish in college, I wanted to apply some of those skills in the field of communications. I got my journalism degree at the University of Iowa and I thought okay, I'll go be a journalist. So I interviewed, after I graduated, with the Chicago Sun Times thinking, well, I went to journalism school shouldn't I just have my own headline and my own column at the Sun Times, isn't that sort of what's next for a 22 year old college graduate. Turned out that, like every career, isn't quite the case... that you have to earn your way through sort of beginning years of your new career. And so I worked on Capitol Hill and my first job was an opportunity, let's say, to work in the field office answering phones and opening mail. And while that may sound kind of basic, it gave me a great appreciation for what's on the minds of constituents that are represented by members of Congress, who are in most cases also voters, and how they connect with their elected officials, and that sort of simple process of service, right – elected officials are there to represent people, want to really help them as much as they can... And sometimes the language of Washington DC doesn't really translate well into the language of central Illinois. So I found my first years out of college to be playing that role, trying to simplify what can be complicated legislative or policy language so that people can understand what's going on. And I worked for two great members of Congress who spent a lot of time, if not every weekend, in their home district in their own way translating what had happened in the nation's capital and making it relevant to senior citizens, and farmers, and others who were curious about what is Washington doing and why is it important to me. I loved that, and that's why I did it for a decade and a half, but I found that the things that had I studied and learned early, which is this sort of craving for other cultures and languages, to be gnawing at me. And I wanted to work overseas. I had studied in London for a semester in college, and the best way for me to open that door was through an agency, working for Burson-Marsteller, which is one of the first public relations firms that actually worked internationally and opened offices internationally. And not long after I joined, ended up being assigned to a big client, in Germany. And although that wasn't one of the languages I studied, I felt like okay, this is a new challenge. It's something I like, I like to learn, and really flourished, kind of, in my spirit with being in a new country, understanding the way that communications is done in a very different country, and the communications infrastructure in Germany. And my job there was really, at first, Pan European, and then eventually global managing a global team for a very globally minded technology client. And that I found to be just extremely rewarding, where I was able to, to work across geographies, use those language skills, understand the cultural adaptation that even something as agnostic as technology can require for people to understand it. And that, to me, opened an exciting door to the opportunity to continue to work overseas, in a new part of the world, which in 2009 became the Middle East. It's a region that's always fascinated me, I had never lived here, and so I thought I would give it a try. A former Burson colleague who had worked here suggested I come over and help set up a technology entity based on semiconductor manufacturing, and it was just sort of additive to what I had done previously in my career. And so 13 years later – here I am. It started as a yearlong experiment that turned into something greater, which is kind of typical for me – I tend to embed and stay in a place for a much longer period of time than I anticipated; but so far it's been an incredible experience.

Stacie Berdan: That sounds fabulous, and so much that our listeners can learn from. Really you did set your sights on something, and you went for it you did it, made it happen. And although it sounds kind of easy when we look back, right, I'm sure there was a lot of hard work that went into – it probably some luck, some timing and things, but being in the Middle East right now, in UAE, what is it like to live and work there?



Brian Lott: It's probably one of the most dynamic places on the planet, largely because you have a, you know, it's not a monolithic place, right. The Middle East is, as one would describe it, stretches from North Africa to what we might consider to be the traditional Levant to the Gulf where I'm located, the Arabian Gulf, into some parts of Southwestern Asia. And so, it is, it is as varied as, as anywhere on Earth, and multilingual, multicultural... What's so interesting to me about the UAE is that expats are the majority, the large majority here. It's a small country, it has thrived on trade and its history. And it is really populated and at the professional class, highly so, by expatriates who come here because of the work opportunities, the high standard of living. UAE has not always been a wealthy country, but with a hydrocarbon-based economy in the last half century has become one of the most prosperous on Earth. And unlike other countries, it is thinking very carefully about how to preserve that wealth through smart investments, through thinking long term, and really trying to solve some of the world's biggest challenges – from climate change, to food security, to just regional economic and defense security, right. It's a tough neighborhood. You have Iran to the east. You have Yemen to the southwest – both areas of political turmoil. You have Syria a bit to the north. So it's a place that has seen a lot of geopolitical activity, to say the least, in the last half century, and yet it's managed to navigate its way through to a place of relative stability, so much so that people are really looking to come here in significant numbers, so much so that that the country evolves. Every six months, there is a new economic strategy, there's a new, significant pace of development around housing and infrastructure. There are liberalization laws that have happened over the last three years, largely because of COVID, allowing people to stay and work here. They don't want people to go back to their home countries out of fear of, you know, a change in regulatory policy or, or health security. So the country is really focused on maintaining its talent base, which is, you know, obviously thoughtful, and a lesson for a lot of other countries. You know, the biggest challenge, one of the biggest challenges, about being here is, obviously, the climate. It's extremely hot from April through the end of September. And the summer months of June, July and August are pretty intense. There's not a lot of outdoor activity that you can engage in for most of the day, so you have to adapt. And that is, that's new for a lot of people who didn't grow up, just like me in a climate in the Southwestern United States, where if you're used to Arizona, or Southern California heat, you can adapt here. It was very new thing for me, and it took me a while to get used to it.

Stacie Berdan: So you've described a fast-paced growing economy, which sounds thrilling to work in. What are some of the hottest industries or top types of jobs that are on the rise there, that maybe listeners should be thinking about?

Brian Lott: So the UAE is really trying to shift away from its economic base, which is hydrocarbons, right? It's home to roughly 6% of the world's oil and gas, most of which it actually exports for economic reasons. So, they sell a great majority of that oil and gas to Egypt. They've tried to diversify their energy strategy to include nuclear. So, there's a peaceful nuclear reactor that just started operations last year here. Really, the only one really, outside of Israel, in the Middle East. There is a substantial desire to invest in – Mubadala has been at the forefront of this – in renewables. They started that path in 2006, with the creation of a company called Mazdar, it is one of the largest investors in wind and solar power. And so a great percentage and increasing percentage of the energy mix here is from renewables. 15 years ago, people thought that was a little unusual for a hydrocarbon-based economy to invest in renewables when it didn't need to, but it had the foresight to do so. And now you see the economics of renewables, at least on par with traditional energy sources, and the world shifting as climate change really starts to bite. And people see the wisdom of the importance of shifting to a much more sustainable source of energy. So that's, that's one big shift to diversify away from hydrocarbons. I think the other fascinating thing about the UAE is that it's always been a point of trade, right? It's very close to India, it's close to Africa. So it is at a crossroads between east and west and north and south. And a city like Dubai, which is well known for its tourist attraction, people come here to enjoy the climate during the better months. But they also are home to world class hotels and restaurants and such. But it really grew up on trade, bartering, across east, west, north and south. And so Dubai really thrives on that international trade, now in bigger industries, steel, aluminum... it has a significant number of ports... so there's a very large amount of port commerce that comes in. We're starting to get cruise ships, as you can imagine, so the infrastructure that goes around that kind of tourism is an important component of the next several years. You're seeing world-class universities like NYU opening here five years ago – New York University has a



New York University Abu Dhabi campus. The Paris Sorbonne has a campus here. The UAE has its own local campuses which are... which are excellent. And you're kind of seeing almost a globalization strategy, where the UAE is opening up worldwide, again to welcome new areas of professional opportunity. And, you know, my boss, who started his career, just out of college, at the national oil company, is now in charge of an investment company that invests in things like renewables and semiconductors, and biotech, and pharma, and food security. And these are all issues that are opening up countless professions, for people who a generation ago thought they would either work for the government or the national oil company. And that's really the strategy the next 50 years, is to try and evolve those more knowledge-based professions to a place to keep people here and to keep people thriving.

Stacie Berdan: I have so many questions. But what are some of the aspects, you know, of business etiquette, cultural nuances layered into the job that you've needed to adapt to? Because, although you're living in the Middle East, which you've described as... as there are the differences, but working and living among a larger population of expats, how does... how does that work? What is that, like from a, you know, a cultural, cross-cultural perspective?

Brian Lott: Well, obviously, it's a Muslim country, right? So, you have a religious appreciation that is important to understand here. There are prayer times during the day, there are mosques, opportunities for employees to go pray during the workday, obviously an important part of their daily structure. There are religious holidays that are obviously different than any other parts of the world except those Muslim countries that we abide by in terms of the work calendar. You know, there are cultural norms, how people dress in national dress, which I find just wonderful, and fascinating, and enriching to understand, and understand the history of the country, and how it's evolved. Interestingly enough, we just celebrated the second year of the Abrahamic Accords, which creates a relationship between the UAE and Israel. So now you're having two Abrahamic cultures, if you will, understanding their own particular customs and culture, as more and more citizens of Israel come here, and are curious to go see the Sheikh Zayed mosque, and vice versa when people go to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. So you're getting a real cultural mix. You obviously have numerous other cultures here. There's also a bit of myth-busting, right. So not a lot of people are completely knowledgeable about the UAE. They don't know the difference between, let's say, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia or Kuwait or Bahrain. And so, they tend to see it as a monolithic culture, which it's not. Some people still have the impression that women aren't allowed to work or allowed to drive, which is not the case at all. More than half of my team are women, more than half of the UAE cabinet are female. There is a significant emphasis on women in the workforce or making a major difference, especially in the new generation in these new knowledge-based careers, which are... which is exciting to see. And obviously there's a bit of a... of a structural difference, you know, what is a Sheikh? Why is that title important? Why is the government structured the way it is? Is it a democracy as we know it in the US? No, it's not. But it's, there's definitely a voice and a representation for the people of the country. There's a matchless kind of emphasis, which means that typically the leader hears from people during regular hours where they can come in and ask for anything from a street repair to something more substantial from a policy standpoint. So it's just a different way of life, and a fascinating one, and one that has really tried to communicate and articulate its tolerance, in a way, to other religions and other cultural rules, sorry, other cultures around the world, that makes it unique, I think.

Stacie Berdan: Couple of top tips, you've given so much information, but a few could one, two, three quick tips for listeners thinking of working? What would you say?

Brian Lott: So, from a career perspective, one of the things I've learned is to be flexible and be open minded. I never thought when I graduated from college that I would end up here, but I have found everything along the way to be educational, right? You're not going to... you're probably, especially in this day and age, have a career that's a straight line, like maybe our parents or our grandparents did that. That's the one thing. I think, in terms of the UAE, in particular, there is a, there is a hunger for people with different experiences. And for a kind of adaptable mindset, it's important when you come to the UAE, that you'd be respectful to the culture. There are all the things you can find in terms of food and drink in the West, but, you know, having an appreciation that you're not in London or New York, or Mexico City when you're in the UAE is important to keep top of mind. And, I think just a general



curiosity about the country and its role in the world is really important for anyone who's interested in coming here and looking for a career.

Stacie Berdan: So what are some of the other challenges you've seen – in not only where you're working now, but, but around the world, working internationally?

Brian Lott: You're far away from your family. That's a big challenge. My parents are still, they're older, but they're still healthy and contributing to my joy on a weekly basis. Although I don't get to see them as often as I'd like, I do get to, to Skype or Zoom with them on the weekend. So that's, that's great. But I'm not physically near them to help if they need anything. So that's one challenge. Sometimes after, especially after 13 years away from the US, I'm starting to wonder where home is exactly. And what does home mean. I'm an American citizen still and proud of it, but is that home? Or is this home? Or, you know, I've got a wife and two boys - where do they call home? So that's, that's an interesting dilemma that many expats have after they've been out of the country for a while. And there are small things, right, like I completely lose touch (and I shouldn't) with who's the best football team or who's the best baseball team and who's ahead, you know, silly stuff that that I wouldn't even think twice about were I in a US city. But here, I shifted my weekend viewing allegiance to the Premier League Soccer. And so, you know, I'm much more able to tell you where Man City is in the Premier League table than I am the St. Louis Cardinals.

Stacie Berdan: Of course. And as it should be. Taking a step several steps back, what do you see on the horizon that those people entering the workforce or even new to the workforce need to be aware of and prepare for?

Brian Lott: I think there's, there's one thing that's gonna sound counterintuitive, which is that, in all my years, what is still true today is as true as when I graduated from university, and that is good writing skills are essential. Particularly if you're an American - good, good English language writing, knowing how to write well, knowing how to write concisely, those journalism classes I took a long ago continue to serve me and they're just foundational to everything that I do as a communicator. So that's one. I think the second is just understanding and staying literate, particularly for someone who grew up with the physical newspaper, that there are different ways of communicating, right. Not that I am as knowledgeable as others about Instagram, and Tiktok, and Snapchat, and whatever's next. But you can't lose sight that those are extremely effective, if not the most effective ways to communicate short video and other concise messages out, even at a corporate level, right. So it's just the pace at which communications is changing is really important. And different skills, particularly in visual and audio visual, they're just going to be so critical, as we look ahead.

Stacie Berdan: I could talk to you all day, you actually have such a rich, diverse background and career that, that there are so many questions that come to mind. But I'm wondering, is there a piece of advice that you were given early in your career that you didn't take?

Brian Lott: That I didn't take? Yes, I had one advisor that I respected a great deal, who looked at everything I was doing in college and thinking about a career and said, you're doing way too much, you should focus – you should focus on one language, you should focus on one specialty, and drill down. Right? This individual was my classical literature teacher, who of course could quote the Homeric epics by memory. That is what he had spent his life studying. So when he looked at someone like me, who to him must have seemed an inch deep and a mile wide, that... it was just counterintuitive for him that anyone would be able to find a career in that way. Interestingly enough, I walked out of there thinking okay, that's not me. I am not a specialist in one particular thing. I'm a nibbler. I love to experiment. And so I stayed with that, I dabbled, and I eventually found a way to win, to make it work for me. I'm a dabbler. I just love to do that with everything in my life in terms of being open to new experiences and staying out of it. Other people may have other experiences, other people may want to be that deep specialist that they know one topic extremely well. So I think you just need to know what works best for you. So that when you get that advice, it either resonates that yeah, this is the way I want to go, or nope, that's not for me.



Stacie Berdan: Knowing what’s best for you is really important piece of advice because through these podcasts we give all kinds of advice, and sometimes they do seem kind of contradictory. But what you just said is absolutely true and everyone should focus in... what is it that works for them. As we wrap up, since it’s time to wrap up – is there anything else that you’d like to add?

Brian Lott: It’s just a joy to participate in these conversations, and one of the things that I think that I am more optimistic about, that I ever have been, is the potential of the next generation that is so attuned to where the world is going and the issues that need to be resolved, and are really committed to action, right, and that to me is really exciting. And for me, I just want to be a part of that change and contribute to it as much as I can, and to empower those people who are ready to get in there and mix things up because that’s going to save us.

Stacie Berdan: It’s been an absolute pleasure speaking to you today, Brian, I really appreciate you taking the time, because I know you’re a really busy guy. So, thank you.

Brian Lott: I loved it and it was my pleasure. Thank you.

[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!