



## Season 4, Episode 7 – Working Abroad in Israel

### **Stacie Berdan**

*International Careers Expert  
(Podcast Host)*

### **Robyn Kessler**

*Commercial Counselor &  
Senior Commercial Officer  
U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem*

[Music]

#### **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 Israel to hear from Robin Kessler, commercial Counselor and Senior Commercial Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem. A career diplomat, Robyn most recently served as Executive Director for the Department of Commerce's Middle East and Africa region, where she oversaw a team of more than 200 people in 27 offices across the region. Robyn previously served in India, Afghanistan, Russia, Mexico, and Belgium. And prior to her commercial service, she worked in the private sector for almost 15 years for Manugistics and Sara Lee, in the U.S., Belgium, Philippines, France, and the Dominican Republic. All told, Robyn has lived and worked in 10 countries. And she's here with us today. Thank you so much, Robyn, for being with us.

#### **Robyn Kessler:**

Thank you, Stacie. It's really wonderful to speak with you today.

#### **Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, so let's dive in. One of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the type of global careers that are out there – more than just titles. Tell us, what is it that you do?

#### **Robyn Kessler:**

Okay, I'll try and keep it simple. I joined the U.S. diplomatic corps about 19 years ago, and I now work for the U.S. Department of Commerce's U.S. Commercial Service. Foreign Commercial Service officers work across a spectrum of U.S. and foreign government and private sector organizations to develop and articulate the United States' commercial policy, to help promote U.S. exports abroad and inbound foreign direct investment into the United States, and to protect U.S. commercial interests abroad. So, my career as a commercial diplomat is really a mix of government-to-government engagement, and kind of like being an international business consultant, assisting U.S. companies to access and grow their businesses internationally. So, my day-to-day work is really varied. It's ever changing. On any given day, I may have meetings in the morning with government officials talking about trade policy restrictions that harm U.S. business interests, and then, in the afternoon, I'm out visiting a local company, talking about the opportunities for them to invest in the United States and have access to the world's largest consumer market. It really is a fabulous mix between those elements. And because of that, commercial diplomats, we, you know, we do spend a substantial portion of our careers overseas, you know, at our U.S. embassies and consulates, about two thirds of the time is overseas.



**Stacie Berdan:**

So... interesting... So, you're, you're actually... I love the way you've described that, it really paints a really good picture for our listeners, because you have business experience. I mean, going back to your early career, working for the private sector... You have an MBA... So, it's not that you just went straight into government work. So, can you tell us, I mean, a little bit about how you started in the private sector? Why you transitioned, how that happened?

**Robyn Kessler:**

Sure, that's a really good question. And, you know, I think I'm a firm believer that a lot of life is timing. And my move from the private sector to the public sector is really a mix of good timing, as well as prioritizing what is important to, to me and to my family. So, after business school, I joined Sara Lee Corporation working in international business operations. And I had met my husband during graduate school. Not shortly after we graduated, he joined the State Department as a diplomat. And so, you know, as a couple, we prioritize our respective careers on an equal basis with our life as partners, which you know, for me meant really fascinating opportunities with Sara Lee and then Manugistics in several management consulting roles for those companies overseas – as you mentioned, Philippines, Paris, Dominican Republic and Brussels. And then, when I learned about the Foreign Commercial Service as a career, I thought, this is really a perfect fit for me, because it really took the sort of international business consulting experience that I had, and I could use those skills that I had gained in the private sector in a public service opportunity that allowed my spouse and I to do what we both valued most, which is exploring the world by actually living and working in other cultures. And, you know, I know it's not always easy to balance your personal and your professional goals, but I am really pleased with how I've managed to do just that.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, that's great. I just love that story. Is there like a tip for couples kind of going abroad? How to actually manage kind of dual careers like that? Is there one piece of advice you'd give to listeners?

**Robyn Kessler:**

Yeah, I think on that one, it's really about being open and honest with yourself and with your spouse. You know, you really do have to talk about those things. Living overseas is not for everyone. You know that the diplomatic career is not for everyone. It is an incredible experience for my husband and I, it really is the perfect fit, but it isn't for everyone. And you really do have to be honest with yourself and with your partner, and other family members as well. We don't have children. But for those that do that, that's another level of consideration that becomes a part of it. It's just really about being open and honest and talking through what the opportunities and the concerns are.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, 'cos you got to balance each of... Nobody, nobody can take precedent, or I guess it's sometimes one does take a little precedent than the other, the balance... Wow. Well, you have had a stellar career so far working around the world, as we as we've mentioned, so many places, so many exciting moments in history. Can you share some of the highlights with us?

**Robyn Kessler:**

Sure, I'd be glad to. I would say, certainly the year that I spent working in Afghanistan was a career highlight. It wasn't a typical commercial service job. Obviously, the opportunity for promoting U.S. exports and foreign direct investment into the U.S. are, are somewhat limited. But it really was an incredible opportunity to work within a broad mission that had so many, so much representation from the U.S. government in so many areas. And, you know, I'm proud of some of the things that I did – I established an American Chamber of Commerce in Kabul, which helped to build and support a private sector, I also really did give special attention to supporting women in business in Afghanistan. And I have one particular, you know, memory, one of my most memorable encounters was with an Afghan woman who had started her own construction company. She was actually... her actual experience was in the



medical and healthcare field, but she knew the opportunities that were out there in terms of reconstruction, and she started this construction company. And initially, she told me, her husband had ridiculed her about the idea. And two years later, he was working for her. So, it's those kinds of stories that really... and those... and that's not a story, that's true life, you know, it, it was incredibly motivating. I think, you know... which kind of leads you into sort of tips or things that I've learned... you know, over my career, one of the things that I've really learned is about going into each new opportunity, or each new environment with an open mind. And without preconceived notions of what it's like to live or work somewhere. Of course, you have to do your homework, and you want to learn about the country, you want to talk to people, but you shouldn't let that influence you too much. And so, I always sort of sum it up to, in terms of advice, is embrace the opportunity, you want to take advantage of all the things that are the positives and the new and wonderful experiences and do your best to minimize the negatives. But there will be negatives... When I... just one quick story on that... Before I moved to India in 2017, I was chatting with a friend who was already serving there in New Delhi, and I asked her what was it like to live in work in India and she... her response really resonated with me because she said: once I learned that “you can't fight Mother India”, she let herself experience the whole onslaught of you know, of sensory overload that is living and working in India. And she let herself experience all that the incredible opportunity could offer her, and that's something that I think I wish I would have known at the beginning of my time as an expatriate. Because it really is applicable to every new environment you find yourself in.

#### **Stacie Berdan:**

Oh, yeah, love it. Of course, you have to embrace. And you can prepare, as you said, we all need to do but you can't prepare 100% for sure, for sure. But now you are in Israel. So, you've gotten into Israel and you've moved in the middle of the pandemic. Let's dive into that. What's uh, what's it like to live and work there?

#### **Robyn Kessler:**

So, there's no question it was definitely challenging to move overseas during the pandemic, but I had moved so many times before, I knew how to get myself organized, and quite honestly, the most difficult part was getting the veterinary certificates for our cats that took an extra couple of weeks. But all things considered, it really did go smoothly. And I think really the hardest part of the move was on the receiving end, once we got to Israel, because at that point, Israel was in a total lockdown that had mandatory two week quarantine. So, I spent my first two weeks here in Israel in... basically locked in our apartment in Tel Aviv. We luckily had a patio – little, a little porch or a deck that we could go out onto for fresh air. But, you know, again, overall, that's a very small price to pay for the opportunity. So, you know, Tel Aviv – some people might be familiar with it, others might not – you know, Tel Aviv is a really exciting cosmopolitan city. It's on the Mediterranean, so I get the opportunity to walk to the beach quite frequently. Israel as a country isn't really that large. It's only about the size of New Jersey. So, my husband and I have really taken advantage of getting Israeli national parks pass and visiting the parks and nature reserves and some of the world heritage sites that are here. So, it's really incredible. Israel, you know, as a country is a high-tech haven – most people might know it by one of its nicknames which is a “startup nation”, because of the country's innovation ecosystem. There are more than 300 international companies that have research and development centers here in Israel, and Israel is actually number one in the world outside of Silicon Valley for startups. So that part of it is really a dynamic, amazing environment to be in. In terms of kind of working here, I think one of the things that can be a little bit off putting for Americans is that, you know, Israelis are very, are generally – and again, it's a generalization – but are generally direct, assertive, motivated. And they're also very, very keen and aggressive negotiators. And that, as I said, can be a bit of a, you know, take a bit of getting used to, for Americans. I was told very early on arriving after I had arrived here, and I was meeting with Israeli business contact, and, you know, he told me I was too nice. And so, I took his input to heart, and the next time I talked to him, I delivered the very disappointing news that I had for him much more directly.

#### **Stacie Berdan:**

Oh, I love that, that is great. Yeah. And some, some Americans at least... I guess it's the flip of going somewhere like the UK or China, where they're not as direct. So it's interesting that I have never heard of an environment to work



in that is even more direct. So that is a great advice. Great tip. And the startups, yeah, entrepreneurial haven... Wonderful. So that's some of the... that's one of the industries, right. I mean, so startups are there, but what other types of jobs and things are on the rise there?

**Robyn Kessler:**

So I think, you know, you're absolutely right – when we talk about, you know, sort of the industry that's important here in Israel, I would say, you know, tech is... sort of underlies everything. There's almost nothing here that doesn't have tech to it – even, you know, obviously, agriculture, ag tech is incredibly important here, because this is a country that started literally with nothing, you know, it was a desert. And so, the kinds of... the way that technology is applied to everything in this country is incredible. Defense and aerospace is also a really important industrial focus, because, you know, Israel is situated in a difficult neighborhood, surrounded by a number of adversaries. And so, its military technology is world class. And this continues to inspire innovation into other sectors very similar to how it works in the United States with our, you know, Department of Defense and how that release spurs innovation across the board. And so, that part of it, I think, is really important. And, you know, also when you look at it from a, from an economic standpoint, in, you know, as of 2022, Israel has one of the highest population growth rates among the OECD member countries. And in a few years, it's projected to be one of the most densely populated countries in the world. So, another really important sector that a lot of attention is paid to is, broadly, energy – whether it's, you know, renewables, electricity... Israel is an electricity island, meaning its network isn't connected to the systems of neighboring countries. And so it really has to be self-sufficient in meeting its demand, which continues to grow because of the population increases.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Wow, that is really interesting. So, to that point of being an island, that there are geopolitical issues that you're surrounded with on a regular basis – what's that like? What can you talk to us about with respect to that?

**Robyn Kessler:**

Yeah, absolutely. You know, the Middle East is an incredibly dynamic place to live and work. And what's been particularly interesting with respect to Israel, is the Abraham accords. So hopefully, that term is something that listeners are familiar with. These are the agreements normalizing Israel's diplomatic business and cultural relations with several of its Arabian Gulf and North African neighbors. And those normalization agreements, those Abraham accords, really are significant because it's resulted in improved security, greater commercial and corporate cooperation, economic benefits, and an increasing range of cultural linkages between the countries, even just from a tourism perspective and the ability to travel between these countries, the opportunity to fly direct between Tel Aviv and Manama, Bahrain is really, you know, a game changer. As I mentioned earlier, Israel's high-tech economy really takes place, you know, takes credit for the country's continued economic growth, even during the pandemic. And... but what's an interesting counter to that is that a tech driven economy, you know, would basically be expected to continue to generate high rates of productivity growth. But interestingly, Israel has one of the lowest rates of productivity growth in the OECD. So, it really kind of looks towards the future. And there are some concerns that Israel's economic growth isn't sustainable due to some of the socio-economic factors that are prevalent here. They've got an education system that's challenged by Israel's different ethno-religious groups and what is needed and required across those different ethno, you know, those different religious groups. There is also with the population growth and the anticipated demographic changes actually predict that with that population growth will actually be sort of poor Israel, which obviously has a big impact. And, something very similar to what we experienced in the United States, has been traditionally underinvestment in infrastructure. And that has an impact as well. You know, all of these factors, and none of those are really helped by the fact that there is political instability in Israel. As a matter of fact, just next week, Israel will go to its fifth round of elections in less than four years. So, incredible opportunities, both within Israel and regionally, but a lot of factors that create questions for the future.



**Stacie Berdan:**

Gosh, yeah. So, if listeners are thinking of moving to Israel, what kind of tips would you give them? Because you've given us a lot of great information? Is it a good place to kind of relocate? Is it just for entrepreneurs and tech? What do you think?

**Robyn Kessler:**

So, I think, you know, it really does, depend. Living and working in Israel can be challenging. On one hand, Israel can seem very familiar to many, but in other ways, it can also be difficult. The population in Israel is about 80%, Jewish, with a large part of that Jewish population being secular, or what I kind of describe as more culturally Jewish than traditionally, religiously, observant. But the Orthodox Jewish population is growing rapidly. And with that comes a very different kind of mindset. So, you know, I think there's definitely incredible opportunities here. There's incredible, tremendous creativity. It's what made this country the startup nation. But I do think, for anyone thinking of possibly moving or working here, it is important to have some type of connection to the culture and to the society in Israel to really comfortably live and work here. You know, being a diplomat in a complicated place like Israel can be very, very different – and frankly, probably easier – than what an individual expatriate or somebody that's coming to, you know, move here to live, what they would experience in day-to-day living and working.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's interesting. So, what are some of the... I mean, you talked about some aspects of, you know, working there... other cultural nuances or business etiquette, things layered in?

**Robyn Kessler:**

Yeah, definitely. You know, every country has its Dos and Don'ts from a cultural and business perspective. I think one of the most important Dos in Israel does relate to the fact that a large percentage of the population here is Jewish, and that's in, you know, you really do have to respect the Sabbath. The Jewish faith celebrates the Sabbath from sunset on Friday night until Saturday night, and business is not done, business is not conducted at the time. Most places are closed – certainly stores, most restaurants, things like that are closed. And so like, you know, most of the whole Middle Eastern region, the work week in Israel is Sunday through Thursday. So that's, I think one of the most important Dos. In terms of things that you shouldn't do, I would probably use – and this kind of goes back to what I had said earlier in terms of the sort of the directness of Israel and Israelis – it's not to use subtleties here. Israelis are very direct, they're to the point with their opinions, and others, you know, you should be as well, Business partners, if you're looking at it from a business perspective, business partners are going to be much more likely to trust you if you engage with them directly and honestly. I think if I take it beyond Israel, maybe for one second, and I think about, you know, Dos in terms of international opportunities or places, you know, other places that I've lived, I think one of the most important Dos is the importance of getting to know business partners – the people that you're thinking of having a, you know, a business relationship with. I think, in the United States, we sometimes, we try and very quickly move to getting right down to business, right. And we don't really spend the time getting to know about our business contacts, their families, their interest... Anywhere else that I've served in the world, it's really been about establishing a relationship with someone, even on sort of a cursory level of just understanding more than just what the business opportunity is. And it is really important to do that. I think in many places, it's not until the second or third meeting that you actually start to get down to the real business opportunity at hand. So that's, I think, something to keep in mind in terms of doing business internationally, writ large.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, that's a great point. Relationships – critical around the world. Also one of the benefits of working internationally – you develop these rich, wonderful relationships with people. One of the benefits, as I said... How about some other benefits of working internationally, beyond Israel? Because you've done so much... And also some of the challenges?





**Robyn Kessler:**

Well, actually, maybe I'll name a couple of the challenges first, because I have listed some of the benefits, but then I'll certainly wrap it up in terms of benefits. But, you know, it's important to talk about the challenges, because sometimes it's easy to just think that it's all, you know, wine and roses overseas. And it's not. One of the hardest things about working overseas, is the difficulty of being away from friends and family. And that, you know, can't be discounted, right? Over the past few years, coming out of the pandemic, I think we've all become comfortable with different technologies. And that's been an amazing thing, right? That let us connect with others. But still, in the end, nothing replaces actually being together. Another challenge can be language. Here in Israel, you know, many Israelis, most Israelis do speak English or some English, so it's not as much of a barrier and certainly not in a cosmopolitan city like Tel Aviv. But no matter where you go, the ability to communicate with someone in their own language is always preferable. Even if someone isn't a natural with foreign languages, like me, even just making the attempt to learn local language is always appreciated. And then I would also say a challenge is about adapting to a new business culture and a work environment. And, you know, I kind of think about that back from my very early days in the private sector when I first moved to France from New York City. And I would, like everybody in New York, I sit at my desk every day to have lunch so I could work while I was having lunch. And my French boss very good naturedly, you know, teased me and said: you are so American, you know, in France, we enjoy the break, and we enjoy the meal. And, you know, it doesn't have to mean that you're going out for a two hour meal. No, it doesn't have to be that. So after that encounter, I really started, you know, I took his advice. And I would start to leave the office for lunch, sometimes just picking up a, you know, a baguette sandwich and eating in a lovely park that was near my office for 30 minutes. But it made a world of difference in energizing me for the rest of the day. So, you know, you really do have to learn how to adapt to new environments. And that's, yeah, that's one of the negatives. So let me just sum up... I guess one, very much in terms of the benefits, is just recognizing how life altering the experience of living and working in another place can be. You know, I didn't, myself personally, I didn't take an international trip until after I had graduated from college. That was the first time I've gone overseas. I would have never thought that I have the ability to live and work overseas, and my experiences, my international experiences, have shown me that I am capable of so much more than I thought I could do. And it really was an incredible boost to my self-confidence, which has really led me to be the successful businesswoman and diplomat that I think I am today.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Well, that's fantastic. I love that. I would have thought that you grew up traveling all over the world or something that's wonderful, Robyn, thank you for sharing that, thanks! You have so much experience. If we can take a couple of steps back, even more, what do you see on the horizon for our listeners, those people entering the workforce or even new to the workforce, right, last three, five years, that they need to be aware of or prepare for?

**Robyn Kessler:**

Sure. And you know, I've been working for quite a few decades now. So, you know, I look at in terms of career trajectory and things that have changed... One of the things that has changed most dramatically over the course of my career is that, you know, companies have gone to local talent. You know, back in the early 90s, when I first moved overseas with Sara Lee, it was, you know, the opportunity to be the American manager in the business that was run, because they wanted to make sure that things were being done the way that the company needed to be done. And that traditional concept of the expatriate really isn't valid anymore. So that's, you know, even more so the case, it's increasing at an incredible speed with the growth of automation. And that's really going to continue, I think, across all industries, all jobs. So, on the horizon, what I think is most important for individuals is to develop your own sort of personal brand, right, it's becoming increasingly important to be able to show what differentiates you. And you have to be able to articulate that in your value proposition.



**Stacie Berdan:**

Wonderful advice – personal brand, things have changed... if they want this international career, going about it differently. Great, great. You've lived so many places, I'm so jealous. Do you have a favorite place that you've lived? I know, it's a tough question. But a favorite place you've lived and worked?

**Robyn Kessler:**

Sure. And actually, I do actually get that question a lot. And as you said, it's not... there's no easy answer, because it's kind of like asking someone to pick their favorite child. And you know, it's funny, because there is this common saying within the Foreign Service that your favorite post is always the one that you've just come from, and the next one that you are going. But in all, in all seriousness, honestly, I have appreciated every place that I've ever lived and worked because it's allowed me to immerse myself in new surroundings every couple of years. It's one thing to visit a foreign destination, but it's a completely different experience to live there and deal with, you know, living in France and, you know, “les grèves” and the French often going on strike... and you know, what that's like, in your day-to-day life is very different than you know, the two weeks that you spend traveling around the country. Not to say that the travel part isn't important. It absolutely is. But living somewhere can be very different. I would say though, probably both India and Mexico, are particularly memorable postings, because just the diversity – the diversity of sights, and sounds, and food, and culture, and people... So, I would definitely put those two assignments near the top of my favorites list.

**Stacie Berdan:**

I love it. I love it. And because they are so different and immersive. And yeah.. Oh, sensory overload was a word I think you used before for India, which I definitely agree with. Yeah.. This has been wonderful Robyn, I really appreciate your time. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you want to add?

**Robyn Kessler:**

Sure, um, I guess maybe I would just end up with offering some overall career advice. And that would be, you know, to someone is...depending on where you are in your career – even if you're already doing something and you're looking to try something new – no matter what, you have to push yourself. So, whether it's looking at a new opportunity to get yourself somewhere different, or if you're looking to build a particular kind of life – no matter what, push yourself, get yourself outside of your comfort zone. And while that isn't always a guarantee for success, I do believe it's the only way that you grow. And you know, I have always found that the most successful people, and quite frankly, those that get the most satisfaction out of the choices that they've made, are those that do just that – they push themselves in ways that they didn't think they could or would go. I certainly know that it worked out that way for me.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Wonderful advice. Thank you so much, Robyn, great words of wisdom throughout, and I really appreciate your taking the time to be with us today because I know you're a very busy woman. So, thank you so much.

**Robyn Kessler:**

My pleasure, Stacie. It was really great.

[Music]

**Stacie Berdan:**

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