



Season 4, Episode 8 – Working Abroad in Ghana

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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's guest is Tamar di Franco, a seasoned energy professional and project manager who has extensive international experience managing projects ranging from 4 billion oil and gas asset disposition in Kazakhstan to solar-powered health clinic construction in rural Ghana. Tamar worked actually in Ghana and lived in Ghana for more than eight years, she worked as a transaction adviser to the Ministry of Energy providing energy economics support and advice to the government. Much of her career has been focused in the energy sector with commercial project work in North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. And currently she is at Deloitte Consulting managing international mining advisory work in Greenland and the Philippines. Welcome Tamar, so great to have you with us today.

Tamar di Franco:

Thanks. It's great to be here.

Stacie Berdan:

Right, so, you have worked in so many places around the world, so many different types of roles. It would be impossible to go over your entire career but can you kind of give us a summary of sorts of your career, so our listeners have a context for our discussion today?

Tamar di Franco:

Yeah, of course. So, I started out my career with an opportunity to study solar energy as a Fulbright fellow in Australia. This was in the early days of the concepts of passive solar heating and cooling, and I got to work with an engineering research group at a university. After a year in Australia, I moved to Alaska to work for a law firm supporting a large oil valuation dispute between the state of Alaska and the oil companies at Prudhoe Bay. I then took a pause to get my Master's in Civil Engineering, and then I moved to Guatemala to take up a Peace Corps type role, working with refugees and teaching them to build woodstoves and latrines. When I returned to the U.S., I went back to Alaska, and took up a role in state government working for the commissioner of revenue on tax policy issues. And after a few years, I took a swerve and moved to the Department of Transportation as I wanted to get my professional engineering license. And then after seven years in state government, I was asked to join an upstream oil company doing commercial negotiations and economic modeling that really launched my long-term career. I eventually moved to Kazakhstan for two years supporting oilfield activities, then on to Houston to work in acquisitions and divestitures. And from Houston, I did a short stint in London, and then moved to Ghana as



commercial manager for a different oil company. My biggest swerve really came when that oil company asked me to move back to London. My younger daughter was entering 11th grade and she really didn't want to move. So, as a family, we took a deep breath and I left that job, hoping to find another that would allow my daughter to finish high school in Ghana. I joined a USAID-funded project where I was the project manager for construction and renovation of rural health clinics. And then after that program finished, I had the opportunity to move into consulting where I've been for the last three years.

Stacie Berdan:

That is amazing. Wow, what a career. Okay, so there's a lot to unpack there so I'm gonna ask you a couple of follow up questions. So, you mentioned swerving – love the term – what do you mean by that? And why has that been beneficial to you and your global career?

Tamar di Franco:

Yeah. So, you know, a lot of people do like to follow sort of a straight path in their career – start in one area and continue in it. And I've always been of the view that when a new opportunity comes along, I just say yes, even if it's not exactly what I'm looking for. I never imagined moving from the oil industry to construction, but it turned out to be a fantastic opportunity. And it opened my eyes to an entirely different industry. And particularly, I think, in trying to get into international work, it's so important to be open to any opportunity, even if it's not exactly what you're looking for. So yeah, I think you'd be willing to swerve and take a risk if you get the chance. And don't be afraid to change trajectories. Your skill set can be used in a lot of different industries; I've worked in energy, I've worked in government work, I've worked in construction, all with the same basic skill set. And so, yeah, I think it's just super important to stay open to opportunities and take something that looks like it's not along your career progression and swerve into that area that looks interesting.

Stacie Berdan:

That's really wonderful advice. And, as you say, it can be anywhere, any types of industries. This isn't just one particular sector... And super important for a global career because you have to go where the opportunities are, and it might not be London like you're dreaming of, it might be instead Kazakhstan or Santiago, Chile, or something like that. That's really cool. So, energy – you've done a lot in that global industry, all kinds of opportunities. But it's an industry that's been changing a lot. What have you witnessed in the sector on a global scale over the last three to four years that would benefit our listeners or students thinking about that as a sector?

Tamar di Franco:

Yeah, it's been super interesting to be in energy. The energy transition, you know, the path to net zero carbon has really hit the global energy industry hard in the past several years. A decade ago, you wouldn't have had energy companies talking about their path to net zero, and now most of them are. But what that means is the kinds of opportunities in those companies are changing. And the kinds of opportunities with government-sponsored international work are also changing in the energy space. For instance, multilateral lenders have quickly moved away from supporting fossil fuel projects, unless they can be shown to support the energy transition. You know, Sub-Saharan Africa in particular is really grappling hard with the transition away from coal and liquid-based fuels for power generation. They're moving a lot into gas and also renewables. So, there's a lot of work in that area now that is really, really interesting, in helping governments to grapple with this – the energy transition. And the private sector has got to help in that, right, they have to be driving a lot of the transition as well. So, the energy transition right now is a fascinating place to work. And it really has hit the energy industry very hard, and much more quickly than I think anyone... certainly more quickly than I anticipated.



Stacie Berdan:

Interesting. Okay... So, you mentioned Ghana and I want to talk about that, because students are really interested in opportunities across the continent of Africa. But Ghana in particular – so exciting, dynamic place – what's it like to live and work there?

Tamar di Franco:

You know, I just think it's such an awesome opportunity to live and work in another country. It's not easy, but it's... it can be so rewarding. So, I lived in Accra for eight years, which is, you know, it's a big messy city, it's the capital. And living in a big city, of course, brings challenges and opportunities, as any big American city would, right. So, there are wonderful restaurants and opportunities to try new food, go to live venues. On the other hand, you can spend a long time in traffic trying to get to a meeting. I was lucky to learn that some of my college classmates lived in Accra so I was able to quickly build a community. It's a pretty international city. So, like any international city, there are expats from around the world, there are locals. So, it's a really dynamic, and just a fun place to live and work. A couple of other things... like, you know, I was able to live in a standalone house for my years there. We had lovely gardens and big yards for the kids and the dog. But many people prefer to live in apartment buildings, which can bring a whole different level of social support, because the apartment buildings often have a swimming pool, and a gym, and so on, so you can find community amongst the folks who you live with. So, what's it like... what else... Grocery stores – very similar to home, right. There are different brands of course. Uber is there and there are local competitor companies to Uber. The fresh fruit is amazing. There are malls and fast food, but I think it's better to go to local shops and buy local as much as you can, because that's what gets you kind of integrated into the culture. And Ghana is host to an amazing number of seamstresses and tailors who make custom clothing. That was probably my favorite thing about Ghana, is that you can get a gorgeous dress or suit or whatever made just to fit you, with gorgeous fabrics and in a very short period of time. It's incredible what the seamstresses and tailors can do.

Stacie Berdan:

That's amazing. That's great. How about... if anyone specific... I know you haven't lived there in a couple of years, but... specific tips or advice if someone wanted to go move there now, anything with respect to types of industries that are hot or anything to pay attention to now, you think?

Tamar di Franco:

You know, so, Ghana is kind of the hub for West Africa in the international aid sector. A lot of international organizations kind of get themselves set in Ghana and then service the rest of West Africa. Because it is an easy place to get to from Europe and the U.S. and so on... So, and it's also become kind of a hub for startups, there are lots and lots of startups, there are several innovation hubs there. It's just, there's a lot of economic activity. So, I think that if folks are interested in going there, it's just, you know, see what you can find that's out there. The interesting work that's underway in any sector, whether it's energy, government, tech... You know, there's a big push from the Year of Return several years ago to bring the diaspora back home to visit, to live. So, it's a really, really dynamic place. So, I would just say dig in, do internet searches, find the interesting work that's happening there. And then, if you have the means, go! You know, go and spend a couple of weeks there, try to find your way around and meet people... It's pretty easy to do that, to get in and spend a little time there. The other thing that I think is super important is to get your vaccinations! It's no joke to get sick in a foreign country, and malaria is really prevalent in Ghana. And if you've not been exposed to it for your entire life, malaria is really, really serious. So, people should not take lightly the advice on vaccinations, I think that's just really important.

Stacie Berdan:

That's a great tip. And something that I think people really do need to consider, because we've gotten a little lax with the vaxes... some places, right. How about culturally like, you know, every place – and you've worked in so



many places, so if you can give some examples, lots of different countries around the world – but culturally, you know, there's a business etiquette, the nuances, things... all those things are kind of layered into the job, but it's really hard to learn right away. Can you share some lessons you learned or some stories or something about that, that kind of brings the cultural nuance to life working in a different place – like a Ghana or a Kazakhstan, or as many, many places as you want to share?

Tamar di Franco:

Yeah, so, that... I mean, that's a really, really interesting question, isn't it. And it's... it can be hard to figure out if you don't have a guide to help you through it when you first get there. One of the stories I like to tell about myself was when I attended one of my very first business dinners in Ghana, it was with a large group of colleagues and government representatives, and it was a buffet. And so, I saw pasta and a green sauce, so I assumed it was Italian pesto. I'm Italian, I love pesto. So, I heaped the sauce on my pasta along with, you know, other things from the buffet, and sat down to eat at the table. I took a bite of my pasta in my eyes started watering. It wasn't pesto, but it was “shito”, a spicy Ghanaian favorite, which is... you put in small amounts on your food to spice it up. So, I ended up admitting to my dinner companions what I had done, and we all laughed at my mistake. And I learned to love shito but certainly not in large servings like that. And, and I just think it's really important to be able to sort of break the ice when you do make mistakes like that, to be able to laugh at yourself, and to own up to those mistakes, because it then opens a conversation with the people you're with about, wow, you know, in my culture a green sauce would be this, in your culture it's this, you know, tell me more about how you make this sauce or things like that. So, yeah, owning up to mistakes when you make them is so important, I think. And specifically to Ghana, another thing that it took me a little while to learn is that, you know, as Americans, we tend to be very direct. But not all cultures share this, right. So, in Ghana, I sometimes learn more about my colleagues or government counterparts wanted in a negotiation or project during a coffee break or after a meeting instead of during the meeting itself. Because culturally they can find it hard to broach a difficult topic in a big meeting setting. And there is a hierarchy that happens in big meetings, where the most senior person is the person who speaks, and the more junior people are not always encouraged to speak. So, if you talk to those folks, like, during a break, you can find out a whole lot more about what's going on in a project they're working on by doing it informally than in a big meeting.

Stacie Berdan:

Hmm, yeah. So, the direct versus non-direct is such a big, big deal when you first go in somewhere. I remember when I first went to Hong Kong – direct, and it was rough. It was a little bit of a rough crash and burn. Yeah... How about in other places – like Kazakhstan – what's it like to work there? Kind of culturally, business etiquette...?

Tamar di Franco:

Yeah, so Kazakhstan is, of course, still much in the mold of the Soviet Union, culturally. So, it can be quite rigid. And it's very command-and-control, right. So, it is a democracy, but it's still quite a command-and-control sort of structure. They do tend to be more direct in their dealings, in business dealings. And the biggest challenge for me in Kazakhstan was language. I tried to learn Russian, and it's, it was for me a very difficult language to learn. So, you know, we had, we had dogs... and when I would go to the grocery store and needed to get dog food, I never... didn't manage to master the way to ask for dog food. So, I would instead bark, and then the grocery people will take me to the dog food.

Stacie Berdan:

Ha-ha, that's one way.



Tamar di Franco:

So, you just got to have a little bit of humility about these things, and go in knowing it can be tricky and challenging, but you can get through it as long as you've got some grace and humility.

Stacie Berdan:

Yep. And as you said, owning up to it and asking people for advice or some clarification, once you've picked the wrong sauce or what have you. Yeah, that's great. So, you have worked private sector, public sector, NGOs.... Can you talk about the types of jobs/careers that actually bridge these types of sectors? Because there's... so many students think, no, I only want to work private sector, I only want to work for the nonprofit. But there's... it's much more complex than that, isn't it?

Tamar di Franco:

It really is. And it's so interesting. So, so many governments have foreign assistance programs, right. So, in the U.S., we have the U.S. Agency for International Development that does a lot of overseas assistance. Department of State, of course, runs our embassies and consulates around the world. But for USAID, for instance, their programs are typically implemented by private sector partners. So, the funding comes through USAID, but then it goes to either an NGO or a for-profit company to implement the project. For instance, the health clinic construction project I managed in Ghana was implemented by an NGO, while the next role I had in Ghana was in a traditional consulting company. So, you know, lots of colleges are setting up internationally, and, as I mentioned before, Ghana has a great culture of startups that are driven by both locals and expatriates who come in and have interesting ideas. So there really is a fair amount of fluidity between government funding and government-implemented programs that are actually largely implemented by the private sector. Because, you know, governments often don't have the capacity to do the kinds of work that... you know, working in detail on a project, building health clinics or, you know, helping a government reform its energy sector. So, governments use the private sector to do the work to further their foreign policy objectives.

Stacie Berdan:

Do you think there are particular skills related to those kinds of bridging jobs that matter, whether it's knowledge or other types of soft skills?

Tamar di Franco:

So, you know, in my experience, probably one of the most important skills to develop is really around project management. Managing an effort, whether it's building health clinic, or leading a negotiation, or setting up a new office, you're learning the basic skills around project management – managing team, setting timelines, keeping people to timelines. And to your point on soft skills, you know – coaxing people through difficult parts of a project, helping them succeed, mitigating problems when they come up, just that whole suite of project management skills to me is what's been consistent across every job I've ever had. And a part of that, maybe a subset, is really problem solving. And I always tell younger colleagues that engineering, the most important thing it taught me was this fundamental problem... this fundamental skill around problem solving. I mean, I love to take a new problem and work with the team to find a solution. Having colleagues around who approach problems differently than I do has, has always led to better solutions. So, you know, that ability to sort of pull together a team to look at a problem and come up with an interesting solution to it is just another really important skill, I think.

Stacie Berdan:

How about, kind of like, drilling down, during... specifically with expertise... Like, so many students will ask, should I be a specialist a generalist? What do you think about that question?



Tamar di Franco:

That's the hardest one, isn't it? I think it's useful to have a specialization. So you can, you know, talk to people about I know a lot about this or that. But it's also, you know, being open to becoming more general is good too. I'm not great with databases and IT and so on, it's not my area of expertise, but I work with people who have those skills so that they can go into a problem and evaluate, you know, that piece of the problem where I can't. Whereas, you know, I can look at the engineering side of a question, and I'm... I haven't done strict engineering for a long time, but I can still look at a problem from an engineering perspective and bring that expertise into solving the problem. So yeah, I mean, from my perspective, it is helpful to get an area that you can say is your area of expertise. You know, maybe it's finance, maybe it's economics. But then you bring that to the broader suite of issues that you might be facing in the job, which you can't always just be in your area of expertise.

Stacie Berdan:

No, of course, because you face obstacles and challenges across the board. So, can you share, what are some of those challenges you've faced by working internationally? How about specifically being a woman in a male dominated field? (I'm making a big leap here... that I assume that it is a male-dominated field.)

Tamar di Franco:

Yeah. So, it can be exhausting to work and live and work in another culture. And I think it's important to give yourself grace when you do face challenges, and you feel overwhelmed. Getting outside your comfort zone brings growth, but it can also be draining. So, it's so important to take those risks to go into another culture. But it's also important to give yourself grace when you get tired. And that's kind of the approach I've taken in my career as well. As you know, I've often been the only woman in the room. And that can be exhausting. And it's just something I've had to get used to in my career. I think it's changing now in engineering and energy, both, but there are a lot more women now than there were when I was kind of coming in of age and growing up in my career. One thing I found really helpful as a woman in energy and in engineering is to find a male colleague you can look to for support, and even ask that person to be the person who's willing to step in and support you, when you're trying to add to the discussion and most of the folks in the room won't give you an opening to talk. Finding a trusted male colleague to work with you has been really, really helpful to me. And it also, again, opens up that conversation about being able to be kind of vulnerable and say, look, you know, it's challenging to be the only woman in the room, can I ask you to be my ally and support me in finding that way to make sure I'm heard?

Stacie Berdan:

It's a great tip, egregious, simple, great tip, because then everybody wins, right, when you succeed. How about balancing? I mean, you shared the story of living in Ghana, having this other opportunity outside but you stayed for your daughter to finish school... How do you balance/manage/juggle career, family, personal life? You know, how do you do it?

Tamar di Franco:

You know, you make a lot of mistakes along the way, but you hope that you come out as a person and as a family stronger for it. I think that, you know, these days, it's easier for me because my kids are out to college, and they're on their own, so... But when they were home, it was a constant juggling act, when you've got a spouse who works and kids, I think it's important to keep discussions open, and be willing to change priorities as you go. It can't always be about the kids, nor can it always be about one career or the other. So, you know, to me, it's always having those open conversations within the family, but also with your employer, and to be willing to say to them – look, I understand that's what you want me to do right now, but that right now, that doesn't work for me and my family, so here, can we consider this other option? You know, the more you're open in your communications about what you need as a family and what you need professionally, I think, the more you're going to be set up for success.



Stacie Berdan:

And not be afraid, right, not be afraid, what's gonna happen to me, lose my job or whatever... Because no one wins or benefits if actually you fail, you don't do as good of a job, right?

Tamar di Franco:

Exactly. And I think just to be really authentic, it's so important to be authentic with your employer and to not pretend that you can do something that you can't do, because then you won't be successful and you won't be happy.

Stacie Berdan:

That applies to family life, but also other things, other skills, or anything that you're asked to do, right. It's not just that.

Tamar di Franco:

Absolutely, absolutely. Yeah.

Stacie Berdan:

Is there... you're just so thoughtful and you've done so many things... Have you considered, or have people asked you before, what kind of a piece of advice maybe that you would like to go back and give your younger self or maybe that you give students today?

Tamar di Franco:

Yeah, absolutely. Don't make work the highest priority all the time. I once stayed behind in Astana, Kazakhstan, to work while my husband and daughter went to watch a satellite launch in Baikonur, which is the Russian launch site in Kazakhstan. And that was like a once in a lifetime opportunity. And I let it pass me by because I thought work was more important. And I always regretted prioritizing work in that instance, not going on that trip.

Stacie Berdan:

What do you say, though, to... because that's a great, that is a great example... to people who are like, yeah, but I can't, I'm too nervous to make that decision. I've got to be here for work. How do you have the courage, especially early in your career, to make those decisions?

Tamar di Franco:

That's tough, isn't it? I think you have to be willing to take that risk. And you have to hopefully work in a place where people understand that we are not sort of the monolithic employee, right, we have... we have a full life. You know, there's so much talk about work-life balance these days, and, you know, it's important to find an employer that really, really values that and that will support you in making those hard decisions. And you've got to be willing to have that conversation. And it could be in that circumstance where your employer will say, you know, no, we really can't let you go. But if you don't ask, you're not gonna get the opportunity. So, yeah, opening up and be vulnerable. It's tough.

Stacie Berdan:

Yes, yes, it is tough, especially sometimes, when you think, I got this fabulous international position and I don't want to do anything to mess it up. When in fact, later, we all learn later that if you look back, you're like, well, they really needed us. They were not gonna let us go for anything, right. I mean, there's an element of that.



Tamar di Franco:

Yeah, exactly, exactly. And you have to know that if you get the courage to ask, and they say no, you got to accept their ‘No’, right.

Stacie Berdan:

Of course. Of course. Yeah. This is great. It's been a wonderful conversation, Tamar, I really appreciate it. We've touched on lots of things. But is there anything else you'd like to add, maybe, that you didn't get to share today?

Tamar di Franco:

So, I guess I would just kind of close with how important it is to cultivate grace and resilience, you know, again, to know that you're going to make mistakes, you're going to get tired, you're going to wonder if it's worth the effort to live overseas. But if you are resilient, and you give yourself grace, you'll grow in ways that are really hard to imagine as you sit at home in the U.S. And also, the other thing that I think we don't talk about enough is that it can be really hard to return to the U.S. after an overseas assignment because you'll feel different, you'll be different, you'll have a different outlook on the world, but the friends and family you left behind will see the same person when you come home. And it can be really hard to fit in when you get back. And my younger daughter found that after living in Ghana for a long time, she feels like “the other” in America, whereas people look at her and they see you know, she's just an American kid. So, it's important to just know that going overseas will dramatically change who you are. And that's a good thing. But other people may not recognize that, and they may not appreciate it.

Stacie Berdan:

That's an excellent, excellent point. Thank you for sharing that. And it is absolutely true. And still the area where companies, employers, organizations still don't do enough to help those who have gone abroad reenter.

Tamar di Franco:

I agree.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, there's a real, real need for that. But thank you, thank you for sharing that. It's true. And I really appreciate your time today, Tamar. I really appreciate all the advice you shared and thank you so much for spending the time with us today.

Tamar di Franco:

Thanks so much. It's been a real pleasure. I appreciate it.

[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!