



Season 2, Episode 2 – Global Mobility / Human Resources

Stephen McGarry, Director of Global Mobility, WPP
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 space in the new global workspace.

Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Steve McGarry, Director of Global Mobility of WPP – a world leader in communications, experience, commerce, and technology. Headquartered in the UK, the company has a global network of a 100,000 people across 110 countries. And while WPP may not sound that familiar to you, I'm pretty confident you've heard of its brands – some of the biggest in advertising, PR, and data analytics – Landor & Fitch, Ogilvy, Mindshare, Wavemaker, Grey, and BCW, to just name a few. In fact, the B in BCW stands for Burson – previously Burson-Marsteller, where I worked for more than twelve years! And yes, Steve oversaw my DC-Hong Kong transfer oh so many years ago, so I know exactly what he is talking about. Welcome Steve, it's a pleasure to have you!

Stephen McGarry:

Thank you Stacie, and pleasure to be here.

Stacie Berdan:

All right, let's get started! One of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there. You've been in the global mobility field for decades – tell us about it – what you do in your role today at WPP.

Stephen McGarry:

Global mobility is, for the most part, moving people. It has to do with getting somebody physically from point A to point B as the job asks it to be. That all entails moving somebody, getting rid of a house, helping them find a new house, compensating them correctly, making sure they have a legal right to work there, making sure their taxes are paid properly, and everything in between. That is basically what global mobility is. What do I do – I manage a team that actually helps the agencies and brands within WPP to do that, and also compliance in relation to all that is part of my remit as well.

Stacie Berdan:

Wow... So I guess you've done that for... I think you've been in this business for almost 20-30 years. And, how many countries, how many moves? Do you have even an estimate, a guesstimate of how many transfers you've done?

Stephen McGarry:

A guesstimate: I would probably put somewhere in the neighborhood of 45,000 people.



Stacie Berdan:

Wow! That is a lot of people! All moving around the world... And exciting too. So, I imagine you've seen a lot of change in the mobility space over the years. Can you share with us? Evolution, something you've seen, some trends...specifically highlighting what's going on, what's new today?

Stephen McGarry:

In the field of mobility, especially when you're talking globally, what used to be the norm is that somebody would go out on assignments, let's say from DC to Hong Kong. It would be for a very specific period of time – two, three, four years where jobs need to be done, and that person would come back. And during the time they were overseas, let's say Hong Kong, they would stay on the US payroll, we would do a hypothetical tax, we would pay the taxes for them in Hong Kong, we would give them a cost-of-living allowance and a housing allowance, and make sure that everything they needed they had there. One of the biggest changes in the mobility world is that has evolved into now, if we had that same move, that person is going to Hong Kong, but we are going to tell them: you are on a Hong Kong salary and a Hong Kong contract, you are getting Hong Kong benefits. This is where the job is – you're here until we find somewhere else or you find somewhere else you want to be. So instead of having these so called traditional expatriate moves, now we have more local to local moves – where people are actually moving around the world on local bases.

Stacie Berdan:

That's really interesting. What does that mean for employees? I can picture/visualize what it would've been for me, especially in a place like Hong Kong where the cost of living and rent is kind of really skewed. What does it mean for these people that you are transferring now, what are the differences, besides the obvious – now you've become a local hire in Hong Kong, say?

Stephen McGarry:

It comes down to the employees completely understand that now their job is there instead of being a short-term assignment. They realize that this is a long-term situation, and they have to make a life in the new location. Which is not really that bad, because it is giving people the opportunity to actually build their career on a longer term basis than on a short-term basis. They are getting more experience, they are getting to know people better, and they are getting to know the clients better. You know, there is the cost saving attribute that the company actually gets; however, it also helps the employee as well, because, you know, when you are moving to a place like Hong Kong – yes, the cost of living can be higher and the cost of housing can be higher...However, depending where you are coming from your effective tax rate can go from 40% to 12%.

Stacie Berdan:

Yes, I think mine was something like 9%.

Stephen McGarry:

Yeah... it's something that you can definitely take advantage of.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, that's really interesting, sounds really cool. And especially... drop in, work there for a couple of years and leave again. I like the length of that, that's really interesting. Is this happening for people at all levels, I mean, new hires for instance or people early in their career (3 to 5 years) – what do you see?

Stephen McGarry:

It's happening for people at all levels. Not only all levels within the advertising/marketing/communications industry; even some of the traditional expatriate companies that you have seen in the past – like big banks – they are going to this model as well. Some of the "newer" tech companies that have been around that have what they call 'deep pockets' – that can afford to continuously do these expatriate assignments – they are going to these local-to



local bases as well. You know, it comes down to when, years ago, before the global movement was happening, within the relocation industry itself, if somebody had to take care of Asia business and they were based in New York – for the most part they would move to San Francisco or Los Angeles. Now we are actually moving them to the location where they need to in Asia. And, so, no matter what level you are in, as the domestic moving has actually decreased, the international moving has increased. Because we are sending people where they actually need to be...regardless of the level. And, you know, it's kind of the way everybody is going in this point in time.

Stacie Berdan:

That's really interesting. So, there is opportunity for people brand new in their careers to go overseas with a big multinational company, not just with WPP – you said across various industries – and start their career and plan to be there for many years, kind of building their career in that location. That's really interesting. And I think probably it's going to be really exciting for our listeners who... you know, we've heard that the trend is, and you've explained it very clearly, it isn't just the expat going for a few years and all... because that cost is pretty high... so, this is a really exciting and interesting pathway that listeners can take. So that's great. Are you seeing any particular geographies that are more... more transfers are going to or not, or is it all the same around the world?

Stephen McGarry:

Well, let's take the last nineteen months out of it, because there haven't been a whole lot of people going anywhere in the last nineteen months... But if you go before the pandemic hit, the areas where you'd see a lot of people going to were China, India, in the APAC region... Australia, New Zealand – it's starting to build up again; we are getting a lot more people going down into there as well. The Sub-Saharan continent within Africa – they are starting to get themselves a little more industrialized and people are going down into those areas as well. There are certain locations within Latin America where people are starting to go more often than we have seen in the past – as far as Colombia, Venezuela instead of just Brazil and Argentina. Of course, there is... for our company, because the two headquarters are in London and New York, there is basically the shuttle between New York and London that we have on a continual basis as well.

Stacie Berdan:

Right... So, good to know. This is, again, very inspiring and motivating. But I know that there are a lot of challenges the industry has faced over the year, right? I mean, you discussed addressing one of them. What are some of the ones you see now, moving into the future, that our listeners are going to need to prepare for if they are thinking about a career like this?

Stephen McGarry:

One of the challenges people are going through come about... especially somebody who is younger, coming just out of school... is there are a lot of people that are still underemployed in locations and some of the things that local immigration authorities are looking at is trying to make sure that they get their own citizens employed properly before they start issuing work visas to foreign nationals. So, this is a direct result of the situation we've been in for the last nineteen months. Outside of that, if you take that whole situation out, some of the biggest issues that come about for people is the cultural differences that people have to be made aware of and really educate themselves on, the difference in, as you mentioned earlier, costs between the two countries. One of the things people don't realize, and they should, is that as a US citizen, no matter where you work and live, you still have to file income tax returns every year and pay tax on your income. However, you will be able to get foreign tax credits for whatever taxes you pay, but those compliance issues are things that people really need to make sure that they educate themselves when they are thinking about going overseas.

Stacie Berdan:

Good advice. Are there certain skills you've seen? I'm sure you've seen some successes, as well as probably some huge failures when people have transferred and gone to another culture? Because, yes, working cross-culturally is important. Can we dig deeper in that – what does it mean, what are some of the skills – have you done a post



mortem after someone has returned or moved on – what are some of the skills that really help someone have a successful term?

Stephen McGarry:

The skills that you will see in the people that have successful overseas work experiences, for the most part, it comes down to what the audience is doing right now – it's studying, it's learning, it's listening. One of the things people have to realize is that no matter what you learn in school there is always so much more to learn when you are going into a location. And this doesn't... we are not talking about going from DC to Hong Kong; it could be something as simple as going from DC to Santa Fe, New Mexico. It is literally learning the culture where you are going to, it is learning... I mean, for some people it's the language, for some people it's just learning the dialect, it's learning the slang that people use, it is seeing how people behave. You know, New Yorkers move very fast and when you go to Los Angeles and you are walking down the street – they don't move that fast. It's the same when you go to London – they don't move that fast. You've got to be able to acclimate yourself into wherever you are going, and the way to do that is to study, learn, and listen.

Stacie Berdan:

I love it, yes. And a deep dive into that as well. That's some good advice that may be people who are thinking of being digital nomads – there's a lot of talk about digital nomads and global contract workers out there... can you talk about the pros and cons of being a digital nomad? Is it worth it, is it all that's cracked up to be? Can you talk about that, because a lot of listeners have thought – you know, I'm going to graduate, pick up and I'm just going to move to Costa Rica, Spain... and get a job that way.

Stephen McGarry:

Digital nomads at this point in time are becoming one of the banes of what I have to do, simply because of the compliance issues that go around it. There are a log of countries around the world that simply because they have lost so much revenue within the country itself from tourism, that they have opened up their borders to these "digital nomads". Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that you can just show up with your passport at an Air B&B and say "I'm going to be here for six months". A lot of countries actually will require you for the digital nomad visa, there is a cost to a lot of them, and then there are restrictions on them, on what you can and cannot do. If you are an independent contractor, you are a freelancer, it is so much easier to become a digital nomad than if you work for a corporation. The reason being is that the work that you are doing, even though there may not be based on the digital nomad policy within any country, there may not be any kind of personal tax liability to you, there may be some kind of corporate issues, especially if your company has a presence in the location that you are actually going to. Mexico has a digital nomad visa, however, it is mostly for consultants and freelancers. So, if I had an employee who wanted to go to Mexico to be a digital nomad, one of the things that would happen is that because we actually have a physical presence in Mexico, their presence, the employee's presence in Mexico, might create tax liabilities not for them but for the company based on the work that they are doing. So, digital nomads are really good for people who really aren't tied to a company. There are some countries where they don't care, they just want you to spend money. And that's fine, they are getting people to go there. But that is not the norm, that's the exception. So you have to be very, very careful about where you go on a digital nomad visa, you have to make sure that you get the proper documentation, you have to make sure that you are not personally going to have any tax liabilities with it, depending on how long you stay. Once again it comes down to educating yourself before you go. If something looks too good to be true, most of the time it is. That's why I keep saying: education is the key.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And also, if people think that just, you know... as it becomes more... more remote workers become more commonplace, they think "well, even though I'm based here in the US, I'm going to pick up and move", you've just described how that could create really big problems, financial problems, tax problems, if an employee does not tell their employer that that's where they are living now, that they've changed their location, right?



Stephen McGarry:

Yeah. Yes, exactly. You know, we as a company, depending on where an employee may go, we as a company have a legal obligation, if needed, to contract the person to that location, to pay the employee from that location, to withhold income and social taxes in that location, to benefit that person in that location, including any kind of retirement benefits. One of the things that can come about with the digital nomads is that if somebody is there for a period of time for which they could be able to claim employment rights, and, let's say they are working on a specific client and we lose that client, and we no longer have the need for them and we have to terminate them, one other thing that could happen is that employee could now claim employment and unemployment benefits, not only from the country they are contracted to, but from the country that they are actually sitting in. So, these are other issues that come about with these remote working and digital nomads.

Stacie Berdan:

So, lots of issues out there; it's not...you're right – it's a little too good to be true for everybody. People really need to do their research because they can end up with, I imagine, a huge headache, at the very least, if things go wrong.

Stephen McGarry:

Headache is the least of their worries...in some points in time...

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah. So, that's one of the trends that I wanted to talk to you about. What are some of the other emerging trends that you see? Global mobility – yes, but also just kind of in the workforce in general that you've seen over the last couple of years that would really benefit our listeners from hearing from a sage and wise adviser as you.

Stephen McGarry:

Well, some of the other trends have to do with... there is a lot of work, as you all very well know, because you probably are into some of this as well, is in AI and how we are actually going to be working on a virtual basis, and especially the new hybrid work situation itself. You will be the first generation coming out of university that you are not going to be asked to be tied to an office on an everyday basis. That is a simple plain fact. If you are tied to an office they might tell you that we have a thousand people that are located in this office and we have only 300 seats, which means you can only come in twice a week, if you want to come in. And everything else will be virtual. So, you are in a very good situation in that you are not going to have to go to an office on an everyday basis. I envy you in that. Going to an office for all the years that I have, it can take a toll on you... I now actually have to build in commuting time when I go into the office because for the last eighteen months I haven't had to do it. It's kind of a strange situation for me. One of the things that I think you all need to know as well, and this isn't really a new trend but it is in relation to what I was just talking about and why I brought it up, is that even though we are all getting very comfortable to be doing our work through Teams or Zoom or whatever the situation is, and using your cellphones and tablets and laptops for all the work that you have to do, I think that one of the trends that you will also see as you get into the workforce is that people will be required to actually start having more face-to-face meetings than they have done. There is nothing like having the personal contact. And I think that's something that we all have to remember, even though we haven't done it for so long and the path that a lot of companies are taking is that it is not going to be needed. I personally feel one of the things that is going to happen that it will make a resurgence, people are going to realize we need that collaborative effort of the team to be sitting in a room doing it together. We need to be able to sit down and hash things out. We need to be able to create a team by going to lunch together or whatever the situation is. The personal touch that you get, then the collaboration from having people sitting with you, next to you, in front of you, whatever the situation is, is something that has gone away that I think will actually come back as a trend. Very surely.



Stacie Berdan:

And I absolutely agree with you, especially in a client-facing or a consulting role you really do need to make that contact with your client, so that's great advice. So Steve, you've had a front-row seat in the global arena for decades. We know, people like us, we know that global is everywhere. But a lot of students, a lot of listeners don't really believe that globalization is going to affect their careers that significantly. They don't want to maybe move abroad, they don't want to spend the next five to ten years living somewhere half-way around the world, they just want to stay put. What specific advice do you have for students like this, who are interested in a career, of course, but don't seem to think that global really affects them?

Stephen McGarry:

Global affects everything! If you don't believe that – try to buy a new computer right now. It is not very easy to do. Try to buy a new cellphone right now – it's not easy to do. Everything is global, no matter if you think it is or isn't. The whole supply chain is breaking down because we can't move things. That is part of what global actually is. There is hardly any industry that is not relying on something from outside of the borders of where they are. No matter where you are – the US, the UK, Kazakhstan, Poland, you know, Thailand – for you to be able to be able to do your business you are relying on things that are happening outside of your borders. It could be as simple as banking relationships, it could be as complicated as all of the equipment that you need to be able to do whatever you're doing has to come from there. I would say, if you want to stay in one location, you love the District, you want to stay in the District – that's fine. However, you also have to realize that everything that you are going to be doing will be relying on something overseas or across borders at some point in time. And, you have to realize, understand, and learn about it, because there might be an opportunity at some point in time for you, because of the knowledge base that you have created for yourself, somebody will say "we need you in this place". It's there, it's not going away. So, everything is relying on something happening across the border somewhere.

Stacie Berdan:

All right, so, that's great... And we all have seen this in the last nineteen months, for sure. The global supply chain as well as the way things have really... the ubiquity of communications, the advances in technology have all made this happen even further. So, whether or not you want a global career – please, develop a global mindset and better understand the world around you and beyond you. Beyond your state, beyond your city, beyond your borders... and how it affects your industry as well. So... I'd like to turn a little bit personal now and ask you to share some lessons from your own career. What's a piece of advice maybe that you were given at some point in your career and you did not take it, but later you realized "yeah, maybe I should have"?

Stephen McGarry:

Ha-ha, when I first started out, I thought I knew more than I actually did. And somebody that I was working with at that point in time offered to be a mentor to me because he realized that I needed to learn that it was better to listen than to be heard. And I think that my career could've progressed a lot better and faster if I would've actually listened to him at that point in time, because I was a very headstrong twenty-three year-old who thought he knew everything. And I didn't listen to him and I got stuck...for a little bit...and then once I started listening and hearing what people had to say and stopped trying to interject in every subject that came up, I was able to actually learn more. One of the things that I have taught myself is that you are never done learning, no matter what you are, who you are. There is always something more to learn. Thinking that you know everything is not correct. Everybody is always continually learning, no matter what age you are, no matter what industry you're in, no matter what you do for a living. I wish I would've known that life was a continual learning experience, and that when I graduated it didn't end; and I think anybody coming out of school has to realize that your life is a continual learning experience.

Stacie Berdan:

That's excellent advice, excellent advice. So thank you, thank you for sharing that. Before we wrap up – and this has been a wonderful conversation with you, I really enjoyed it – is there anything else you'd like to add, to make sure our listeners here...?



Stephen McGarry:

I would like to add that, you know, having an international experience is a wonderful thing. If you don't feel that you would like to live somewhere, but still would like to have those experiences – look for a situation where you might be able to actually travel to those locations. To be able to experience different cultures, you know, and deal with people in different countries and regions on a business basis. So it might only be a week or two at a time instead of a year or two at a time. But I don't think that just pigeoning yourself into the United States, into a state, into a region, is going to be the best for anybody's career. I think you've got to be able to get out, and if it's not on an assignment basis, try to find yourself some place that will allow you to travel. Because one, it's fun, and number two, once again, it is a great learning experience.

Stacie Berdan:

Excellent advice, yes, go global everybody, whether it's moving abroad, travelling abroad, and even just exposing yourself to all kinds of cultures and things and beauty – beauty wherever it is we live. Because it's easy to tap into culture too through technology as a compliment... so that's great. Well thank you so much Steve, it's been a wonderful conversation, I've loved catching up with you.

Stephen McGarry:

It's my pleasure Stacie, you know I'd help you out in every shape or form that I can.

Stacie Berdan:

Great, take care!

Stephen McGarry:

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!