

# Resilience And The International Employee

**Why do professionals seek international opportunities and the relocations that come with them? Many would respond with a range of reasons, including an interest in other languages, cultures, and peoples, adventure, experiencing difference, and opportunity to learn, grow, and diversify one's experience. The reasons vary with the individual, but the enthusiasm and excitement a new expatriate feels is more universal. Why then, do so many of our long-term expat assignees succumb to the performance dampening ennui of "one-too-many" assignments abroad? Why do international assignees sometimes lose the original eagerness later in their careers?**

“We love to travel and I just love learning a new language!” turns into “Why does everything have to be so difficult here?”

It is only in aggregate, looking at systems of people over years, that reliable patterns emerge. From a longitudinal perspective, it becomes obvious that international weariness isn't a character flaw in an individual expatriate and/or their family members: it is a predictable outcome of a career spent too focused on tasks and performance and not enough on enjoying the ride. It can be predictably hard for a 50-something senior manager to unwind from the din of work and the dust of

all of the relocations and re-instill a youthful vigour for travel and living abroad. And if the fire is no longer in the belly of the expatriate, human resource practitioners will be hard pressed to re-inspire that same drive. From an organisational point of view, it is far more effective to be proactive and begin early in supporting the personal, professional, familial and organisational resilience of the employee and family starting before the first international assignment and continuing throughout the career span. How can that be accomplished?

Resilience as a professional field is just emerging, but this hybrid interdisciplinary concept already has broad support and an international research base that spans psychiatry, psychology, organisational development, leadership, social work, and performance improvement, to name a few. In the last decade, conferences have sprung up around the world as the value and efficacy of a focus on resilience continues to prove its worth across a wide variety of professions – athletes, warriors, executives, medical professionals, emergency responders and disaster relief personnel have represented early adopters of resilience strategies. So what do these people do differently, and what can those who support them do to train and inculcate more resilient approaches?

First, read up on it. There are scores of terrific books that span the resilience waterfront from personal discovery narratives through very hard science documented texts. Steven Southwick and Dennis Charney's "Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges", is an excellent entry point – well written, easy to understand and follow, but based on solid science by two very serious researchers (Charney is the Dean of Medicine at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in NYC where he oversees the academic and research efforts of over 5,000 doctors and medical professionals; Southwick, also a psychiatrist, is a prominent fixture at Yale's University's Medical School). Understanding the basic premises will allow you to then focus more specifically on your own needs and those of your clients – and yes, resilience like most medicines is only as good for the patient as it is for the doctor, and resilience practice can help inform and improve your own career.

A good follow up step is to consult – through surveys, focus groups, or individual interviews, with experienced expatriates within your community – both employees

and family members. And don't limit your conversations with partners (spouses/partners – a phrase I coined some years ago to describe the evolving reality of our client base to allow broader inclusion). It can be helpful to use a resilience framework – without using or overusing the word itself – to inquire about the sojourner's self-perception of ongoing curiosity and energy for international work. Ask simple questions in terms of wellbeing, willingness to enthusiastically confront the obstacles and frustrations faced in a highly mobile career path, successful strategies used, and perceptions of impact on the immediate and extended family members.

So what are we really talking about with resilience? On a personal level, it represents the emotionally intelligent processes that allow an individual to understand at any point in a career that the patterns of behaviour, perceptions, attitudes, and attention to re-framing experiences with a strong bias towards learning and away from judgement. Southwick and Charney, for example, identify some 10 factors in resilience. Other researchers have arrived at slightly different formulation and terminology and have aggregated some factors into smaller numbers, but there is conceptual cohesion across most of the serious researchers in the field. A quick listing is provided below:

Realistic Optimism	Resilient role models
Facing fear	Physical fitness
Moral compass	Brain fitness
Spirituality	Cognitive & emotional flexibility
Social Support	Meaning and purpose

Adapting Southwick and Charney's resilience model to the internationally mobile employee – the serial expatriate who will have a career of several overseas, multi-year duration assignments, requires an acknowledgment of the very characteristics of a sojourn that make it both exciting and challenging. For example, encountering different ways of doing business, personnel practices and leadership ideas may well create

moral and ethical dilemmas and conflicts with the traveller's own moral compass that can unconsciously sap his/her resilience and energy without any apparent explanation or seeming need for examination. Social support, in the form of long-term friendships and extended familial relationships will most often be absent, or difficult to access during an assignment overseas. It is incumbent, then, on the sojourners to create, de novo, those social support entities in culturally appropriate ways. But creating supportive relationships across cultural boundaries can be exceedingly difficult, ambiguous, frustrating, and occasionally dangerous. Nonetheless, the long-term wellbeing of the traveller is at stake, and adhering to this construct almost invariably leads to greater satisfaction, understanding, and enjoyment of assignments. Similarly, thought must be given to adapting the other factors in order to international mobility.

While personal resilience provides insight into how one can live one's own life toward long-term advantage, professional resilience speaks to the organisational savvy and maturity one brings within the career context. Professional resilience integrates realistic aspirations and ambitions with a broader, more patient view of professional development and satisfaction. Every assignment can be viewed as a tradeoff between immediate and longer-

term personal, financial, organisational, and developmental rewards. Consciously and strategically analysing the cost/benefit on a personal level provides a rational basis for individuals to evaluate their own choices, actively integrate learning, and return to a place of satisfaction. Doing so frees the traveller from the resilience-sabotaging practice of blaming self or others. (Why did I agree to come here? These people are impossible! Getting anything done here is ridiculously difficult!).

Of course, in the real world, it is easier to commit to one's own long-term resilience, satisfaction and wellbeing when all of the choices are under one's immediate control. But we all work for organisations, and with and for people who may have very different ideas about the best expenditures of our time and energies. And sometimes we work in locations where it is indeed extraordinarily difficult to get seemingly simple tasks resolved. But that's the whole point of adopting a more resilient lifestyle: focusing on one's own resilience returns some large measure of control to the individual so that as the years and assignments roll on, the curiosity, eagerness, and enthusiasm one should bring to international work isn't compromised and replaced by an expatriate syndrome of cultural and professional ennui, dissatisfaction and world-weariness.



**RAY LEKI**

Ray Leki is the author of *Travel Wise: How to Stay Safe, Savvy, and Secure Abroad* and is a Professorial Lecturer of Intercultural Management at American University's School of International Service. For over thirty years, he has been involved in global expatriation and repatriation and continues to serve as the director of the Foreign Service Institute's Transition Center at the United States Department of State. In 2016, he opened the Center of Excellence in Foreign Affairs Resilience within his office. Leki is a long-time speaker at international mobility, cross-cultural/intercultural, security, and resilience conferences and welcomes comments and dialogue at [rsleki@msn.com](mailto:rsleki@msn.com).



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