

Doors open for young workers

Working overseas may pave the way, if not shorten the road, to a successful career

MARJO JOHNE

Special to The Globe and Mail

February 22, 2006

When he was 20 and just one year shy of earning a college degree in business administration, Brian Hunt said goodbye to all his family and friends in Hamilton, Ont., and boarded a plane to China.

With his youthful appearance and casual travel clothes, Mr. Hunt could easily have been mistaken for another backpacking youth in search of an adventure.

But business, not pleasure, was the main item on his agenda; awaiting him in the southern Chinese city of Zhuahai was a job as an account manager in a shoe factory.

"My friends thought it was just crazy for me to quit school and take off to go and work in China," recalls Mr. Hunt, who got wind of the job from his father, an Ontario shoe distributor. "But the way I saw it, a lot of people have the opportunity to get a school degree or diploma but not a lot of them will get a chance to get first-hand experience in an Asian shoe factory, learn Chinese and be exposed to a completely different business culture."

Today, Mr. Hunt, now 22, is in charge of product development for the factory, which manufactures shoes for such companies as WalMart, Timberland and Wolverine, and he has learned on the job to converse in Mandarin.

Talk about taking the long road. Yet, as many Canadians like Mr. Hunt have discovered, working overseas may actually pave the way -- if not shorten the road -- to a successful career.

And with much of the industrialized world now preparing for the baby boomers' mass exodus from the workplace, more job opportunities are opening up for younger workers willing to venture beyond their country's borders, experts say.

"We're seeing more programs now that involve students going overseas to work," says Marg Lacy, head of the career centre at the University of Toronto.

These programs run the gamut -- from the popular Student Work Abroad Programme (SWAP), which charges students a fee to arrange travel and work visas and hook them up with foreign organizations that help them find work, to federal government programs that

help fresh university graduates find work abroad and provide them with a living allowance for a certain period.

There also continues to be huge demand for Canadians who want to teach English in countries such as China, South Korea and Japan, Ms. Lacy adds.

It isn't known how many young Canadians go abroad to work, but the numbers are increasing.

For instance, in 1995, Foreign Affairs Canada's International Youth Programs helped about 5,000 Canadians aged 18 to 30 find work abroad. Last year, 24,000 young Canadians found overseas work through Foreign Affairs' youth programs. Australia, Britain, New Zealand, France and Ireland are the top five work-abroad destinations for young Canadians, according to SWAP and Foreign Affairs.

Rod Hurd, president of Travel CUTS, a student-focused discount travel retailer owned by the Canadian Federation of Students which operates SWAP, says about 5,000 young Canadians took part in the work-abroad program last year, compared with about 3,750 in 2001.

So how does toiling on foreign soil translate to brighter career prospects?

Young people who travel to faraway places develop characteristics that employers find desirable, says career expert and Globe and Mail columnist Barbara Moses.

Being thousands of miles from home teaches people to take risks and become more self-confident, self-sufficient and skillful at navigating sticky situations -- all traits that can give them an edge at work.

Sometimes, Mr. Hurd says, simply being a Canadian abroad can open doors to opportunities that would be tougher to get back home.

"Canadians are quite desirable for foreign employers," he says. "We have an international reputation for producing well-educated, highly skilled workers."

Sharif Khan, vice-president of human resources at Microsoft Canada Co., says that his Canadian education and work experience helped him land a senior management position with HSBC Bank in the United Arab Emirates in 1992.

Canada was in the midst of a recession and companies everywhere were freezing salaries. Mr. Khan, then in a junior HR position with a clothing retail chain in Toronto, applied for the HSBC job during a short visit to Dubai. Nine months later, the bank offered him a job.

"It was incredible because I went there and became the recruiting lead for the region," he says. "At the age of 24, I had my own team and I was travelling around the region. It was an unbelievable experience."

Of course, not all twentysomethings who go abroad end up with plum jobs; many just want McJobs in resorts, bars and restaurants to help pay for a travel adventure, Mr. Hurd says.

Adwoa Buahene, managing partner at n-gen People Performance Inc., a Toronto-based consulting firm, says that many of today's young Canadians are choosing to work abroad for reasons different than those of their predecessors.

"With Generation X, the motivation was often necessity and money; a lot of them couldn't find work in Canada after they graduated so they went to teach English in Japan or Korea where, comparatively speaking, they made good money," she says. "With Gen Y, it's a lot more about the experience."

But whether they're working abroad as highly paid managers, teaching English or waiting tables, these young expats can expect a warm welcome back from Canadian employers, Ms. Buahene says.

Cathy Williams, chief financial officer at Shell Canada Ltd. in Calgary, is one such employer.

"Fundamentally, I believe that young people who go outside Canada and work for a while are showing initiative and they really build a lot of different strengths than people who just stay in Canada," she says.

"Generally they become more open-minded because they see more things that are different than what they've seen in Canada, and generally they build confidence, too."

In fact, Ms. Williams says, Shell values international experience so much that it has, on occasion, postponed the start date of a new employee who wants to do a bit of travelling before settling into a job.

Mr. Khan says the global perspective he gained from working abroad -- nine years in Dubai with HSBC and Microsoft, followed by three years in London with Microsoft -- helped earn him the job promotion that led him back to Canada.

The same global perspective also makes him value international experience in Microsoft employees, Mr. Khan adds.

More employers should think like that, says Edyta Pacuk, a partner in the leadership practice division at MICA Consulting Inc., a Toronto-based HR management consulting firm.

"Many business organizations don't tap at all into the diverse backgrounds and experiences of employees who have worked abroad," Ms. Pacuk says.

"There's a whole 'think like us' mentality so you can hit the ground running and be as productive as you can according to the norms of the organization."

Mr. Hunt feels confident that the skills and experience he has acquired in the past few years will be valued by employers in Canada or, for that matter, anywhere in the world.

"Having this job in China can take me anywhere in the world."