

Global careers: New phenomenon or new perspectives?

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In an era where improved technology and increased free trade have created a more global focus in the business world, Thomas et al. introduce a new wave of research that has focused on global careers, noting both a change in perspective of international work and a change in aspects surrounding the career field. Thomas et al. first briefly highlight the traditional views of global careers. The changing perspectives on the subject are then noted followed by three key characteristics of the career field that have changed. Finally, Thomas et al. summarize findings by various researchers on the subject and conclude.

Describing global careers as a “cornerstone” in the field of International Human Resource Management, the authors note that earlier views regarded work abroad primarily as a tool an organization used to have a “positive effect on the path to higher level management.” Recent views, however, see work overseas as more of an experience for an individual’s own personal development and professional progress.

In noting this change in perspective, Thomas et al. also focus more specifically on the concept of a “boundaryless career,” a notion that as economies become more “flexible” and global, experiences abroad become more important, if not necessary, for acquiring new skills and viewpoints that help a company maintain an edge amidst increased international competition. Although the authors note that research has found that not all global careers bring immediate job advancement, many people still voluntarily decide to move to a new country for work.

In the next part of their paper, Thomas et al. note three key characteristics of international careers that have changed recently, accounting – perhaps – for the rise in international work experience. One change involves increased global competition and knowledge transfer. As mentioned earlier, firms want to send more employees abroad to maintain a competitive edge, as developing countries become a part of a growing international marketplace. Nevertheless, at the same time, research has found that many employers lose employees recently returning from abroad. Thus, an increased focus on effective utilization of global experience and knowledge exists among companies.

Another key change in the global career “phenomenon” is the development of global leaders, those who are committed to a more permanent international work status. Citing a 1998 study, Thomas et al. note that finding effective global leaders is an integral part of business success, another human resource goal that allows for increased knowledge and skills for a global edge. The development of global leaders may have also gone from company-initiated to self-initiated in many cases.

Finally, a change in the characteristics of those deciding to go abroad can also account for the increase in global careers. Not only are more women entering the global marketplace, but also a younger generation – more “internationally savvy” thanks to increased media awareness of international issues as well as educational opportunities abroad – is experiencing work overseas, not bound by children or partners. Furthermore, those from developing countries are becoming more likely to take global careers, a testament to the changing international marketplace.

With their paper serving as an introduction for a special issue on global careers of the *Journal of World Business*, Thomas et al. end the work by summarizing the articles following their introduction and then conclude that research of increased global careers can no longer solely rest on traditional views of organizational importance, for the relationship between the company and the individual is now in transition: “The nature of the career in the age of globalization is very different from that of only a few years ago, and this requires us to engage this emerging phenomenon in new and creative ways.”