



Season 4, Episode 2 – Working Abroad in Switzerland

Stacie Berdan

*International Careers Expert
(Podcast Host)*

Michelle Pawlow

*Global Sourcing Manager
AB InBev*

[Music]

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, I have the pleasure of interviewing Michelle Pawlow, Global Sourcing Manager for AB InBev – a global beer company that prides itself on having a 600-year heritage of brewing with current operations in more than 50 countries, and global brands such as Corona, Budweiser, Stella Artois, Beck's, Leffe and hundreds more. Although based in Zurich, Switzerland, Michelle leads projects around the world in Africa, Europe, and the US, across categories and commodities. Welcome, Michelle, it's great to have you.

Michelle Pawlow:

Thanks for having me, Stacie. It's great to be here.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, so let's dive in. One of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there. Tell us what you do.

Michelle Pawlow:

Yeah, absolutely. I have a really interesting and fun job, Stacie. So, I sit in our global procurement office and I'm essentially part of an internal team of consultants that rotates around different projects. Our goal is to leverage our relationships and bring sustainable growth. So if you've been fortunate enough to have tried any of our beer brands, my job is to think about everything upstream that goes to create that beverage to get it to you. So it's starting with our farmers who are maintaining their barley crop and I assess where that barley is coming – whether it's being grown as sustainably as possible – and if we're paying our growers enough, for example. And then, I'm not only thinking about our raw materials, like barley or flavors, and what goes into our products, but also what our beverage goes into. So, our cans, our bottles or kegs... looking at, for example, how we optimize the amount of recycled material. So I've been here at AB InBev for the past year. And during that time, I've gotten to do so many things – lead global negotiations, travel around the world and meet with our suppliers, and discover sustainable ways to encourage both our upstream and downstream partners to use renewable materials and produce less waste. So my scope is wonderfully wide, it encapsulates traditional procurement and pricing policies, but also sustainability and transformation projects, and it's been a great opportunity to learn and work with people from all around the world.



Stacie Berdan:

Fantastic! And global supply chain – on top of everybody's minds these days thanks to the pandemic, and making it all part of our regular vernacular/conversation these days, and a truly global area procurement supply chain.

Michelle Pawlow:

Definitely, yes, we're staying busy these days for sure.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great, well, good to hear. How did you end up working in Switzerland?

Michelle Pawlow:

Yeah, so for me, it was definitely one of those moments where my planning fortunately overlapped with an opportunity. So, I knew when I was studying at college, that living and working internationally was something that I wanted to do as quickly as possible after graduation. So, the summer before my last year of graduate school, I intentionally sought out internship programs for companies that had a global reach. And my thought process and what I had heard from my friends at the time, was that it was easier to get sponsorship to work internationally from within a company rather than as a direct hire. So, I interviewed for and luckily received the offer for the internship with AB InBev, which was out of the St. Louis office in Missouri. And during that summer program I was not shy at all about expressing my interest to travel to see other parts of the business and making it clear that I was very mobile. So getting an international offer after the internship wasn't a given and I would have accepted a return offer within the US at the time, because I just enjoyed the company so much. But I was really lucky to have had a great supportive team during the internship who ultimately matched my desire to live in Switzerland with a job opportunity here.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful. Great. So... strategic about it, planning ahead, got with a great company and obviously a little bit of luck thrown in there, most likely too - a great opportunity at the right time. Terrific. What's it like to live in and work in Zurich?

Michelle Pawlow:

Oh, it's incredible. Switzerland is incredible. Everything here functions so well and on time, you know, half the time I can't tell if I'm in a Swiss city or in Disney World. It has, like, amazing health care, social, environmental quality, high quality housing and infrastructure, incredible natural landscapes, I'm sure you've seen the photos, the mountains, the lakes, it's just gorgeous. Of course, it's also one of the highest costs of living in the world. So you do have to be mindful of managing your costs here, but you can fully take advantage of the weekends and the time off, everything it has to offer. Unsurprisingly, because the country is so beautiful people are really active here and in general, I'm never at a loss of finding fun things to do.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. That makes me think about the cost of living. Were you transferred as an employee from AB InBev in St. Louis or are you a local hire? How did that work for you?

Michelle Pawlow:

I am on a short-term international contract in Switzerland. So, once my contract here is up, then I'm reassessing where else I might be moving. So whether it's back to the US, or somewhere else in the world, or potentially even staying here in Switzerland, just kind of when the opportunity arises, we'll see.



Stacie Berdan:

Great. Sounds very exciting, yeah. Can you shed some light on how are things different in Switzerland and in the US? I mean, things like business etiquette, cultural nuances, office culture, food...

Michelle Pawlow:

Yeah... So, AB InBev itself is not a Swiss company. So I'm sure my personal experience is going to be very different from someone working at a Swiss bank, for example, but I can say that Switzerland is interesting, because even for such a small country, there are three very distinct regions and different subcultures within the culture. So, the Italian side is, in my opinion, very different from the German, which is very different also from the French. Generally, though, I believe that Swiss people will tend to be more polite and formal than Americans who like to keep things casual. So for example, I definitely had to upgrade my college wardrobe from jeans and T shirts, even when just going to the grocery store, because everyone in Switzerland dresses. Oh, well, at least in the big cities. And the country is also quite traditional in a lot of ways. So, respecting hierarchy and rules are definitely followed. So whereas in a US city, you might find people jaywalking across the street, or maybe even littering on the sidewalk. The Swiss aren't as likely to do that, and really take care of public spaces. So, in summary, it's safe, it's clean, it's beautiful and it's also a little bit expensive, but it's worth it.

Stacie Berdan:

It's interesting. So... commuting to work, do you take public transportation? Do you walk? Do you bike?

Michelle Pawlow:

Yes, I do. Yes, I take the train. And it's super convenient. I live right next to the train station. And my office is also just a hop over. So a lot of people rely on public transport here, which is really nice to get around. I haven't felt that I've needed a car at all.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. And of course, as you mentioned, in the beginning, just the whole sustainability and environmentally friendly public transportation is the way to go.

Michelle Pawlow:

Yeah, yes.

Stacie Berdan:

So, you know, in large multinational companies like yours, there's a lot of dynamic tension that exists between and among the different markets, right, sometimes its headquarters versus satellite offices, sometimes it's diverse teams, you know, working 5,6,7,8 different maybe countries or cultures all on one team trying to get to a project... You know, have you experienced this, and if so, can you talk about it a little bit?

Michelle Pawlow:

Yeah, I love this question. Because it's definitely something I'm very cognizant of, especially as I'm newly coming into the organization and through a global role, so I'm well aware that I don't have the full context and insight as my counterparts in the regional zones most of the time. So, I think that's really the first thing is just coming in very humble, recognizing that we're all working together as one team and one organization. I think one thing that ABI does really well is we take extra care to get that diverse input and really encourage collaboration between global and the zones. So making sure that everyone's participating, that any new initiatives are transparent and clearly communicated. And then in a global role, wherever we can find opportunities to share best practices across the



zones or in regions, or if we have tools that might help solve problems, then trying to communicate and relay that information as quickly as possible is super important.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great advice. Great perspective. What other tips do you have for listeners thinking about moving to working in Switzerland? Or just pursuing an international job generally speaking?

Michelle Pawlow:

Oh, yeah, um, I think the best advice that I received before moving here was really to immerse yourself in the experience and the location and to make your new country your new home. So taking language lessons, trying to meet locals, you know, volunteering, just doing things that maybe tourists don't necessarily do all the time. And I found it interesting to try and learn what I can about the history and the geography, because it provides context on culture, local holidays, and also makes you appreciate things as they are now. So, for example, the apartment that I'm living in, I actually found out when I was renting it for the first time that it's older than the founding of the United States. So I think it's really cool to imagine that people who have lived there before myself and how their lives may have been similar or different to my own, it really connects me and makes me feel like I'm part of the Swiss history, even though I don't have relatives here. And then, one other piece of advice is just to be mindful of wearing those rose colored glasses, and romanticizing the process and experience, because it's definitely a big change to move to a new country. And there will be things and people that you'll miss about your previous home. So just go in with an open mind, make sure you surround yourself with a support system that can help you if you ever do feel lost.

Stacie Berdan:

Can you give us an example of maybe some from your own experience, one of those situations?

Michelle Pawlow:

Um, yeah, I think sometimes I just miss, like people from back home and you know, want to make sure that I have them that I can call or set up a time, and some of my friends will have like a recurring time set so that it's not so easy to lose touch. And just make sure that we're updating one another on what it is that we're all doing and trying to visit one another as soon as possible. So, nothing super dramatic that I've had to rely on a support system. Thankfully and fortunately, the people that I surround myself locally with as well are so helpful and amazing. But just making sure that I stay connected to the friends and the family that I have back home.

Stacie Berdan:

Important. But I assume you have had to adapt from the way you worked in St. Louis, versus the way you work here. Can you talk about that? And personally too, personally and professionally – have you had to adapt to some changes that you've seen and gone through?

Michelle Pawlow:

Yeah, great question. No, definitely. The biggest thing, right, is being away from friends and family, getting comfortable communicating over phone calls and FaceTime, sometimes at weird hours of the day. But then the nice outcome of that is that I'm truly present and appreciative when I do see them again in person and have those moments. I think on the topic of weird hours, I've adapted my routine quite a bit. So my working hours are not, you know, the standard US time of nine to five, if that is the standard anymore, because I'm just juggling so many time zones around the globe. So, sometimes I'll have a call at 7:00am with my team member in India, and then on the same day – 9:00pm call with my supplier in the States. So, it's finding time for myself in between those hours to recharge... And it's kind of funny, because in the US, I used to run all of my errands on Sundays, but here the shops



close really early in the day, comparatively, and they're not open at all on Sundays, so making sure I get my groceries and things on Saturday is key. And speaking of groceries, my eating habits have definitely changed. So, back when I was living in Virginia where I grew up, I used to, you know, load up the car, drive to Costco, get my groceries for the next two weeks. And I'm here, as I mentioned – like I have no car. I pick up everything I want for dinner the day of, on the way home from work. And it's pretty much all local and in season produce. So, I don't just grab tropical fruit or berries in the middle of winter, I really change up my recipes based on the time of year. But of course now, also in a traditional Swiss manner, my diet consists mainly of cheese, chocolate and beer anyway, these days, so fortunately, I'm set for those year round.

Stacie Berdan:

You're just painting a great picture of actually living in Switzerland and living abroad. And it is a lot more than just working. What other things do you like to do for fun?

Michelle Pawlow:

Mm, yes, the best part... So, the amazing thing about Switzerland is that it's so close to everywhere else in Europe, right? It's really central. So just in the past six months, I've been to Budapest, London, Amsterdam, Brussels... Just this past weekend I actually got back from the start of Oktoberfest in Munich. So much fun. Travel is definitely what I do whenever I have time and try to take as many opportunities to do it while I'm still here. And then, when I do want to kind of stay local in Switzerland, there's so much in the area, and depending on the season I love to hike, bike, ski, do watersports... You know, my team and I just went whitewater rafting in Interlaken a few weeks ago, which was so much fun. So the weekends are great here.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful. So, and to your point earlier made – immerse yourself... So you are really immersing yourself in life in Switzerland, not necessarily dashing off every other weekend to somewhere across Europe.

Michelle Pawlow:

Yeah, absolutely. I like to have a mix of both, right. And sometimes it's very easy to stay in Switzerland. Like I said, there's so much to do here too. So it's not that there's a need really to escape and go somewhere new and exciting, because Switzerland has all of it if you're looking for it here. And definitely, just getting out of the apartment I think is key and finding other things that are happening locally or in surrounding countries is the way to go.

Stacie Berdan:

Do you have a hybrid work schedule? So is it hybrid? Is it anytime in the office? Is that all the time in the office? What's it like?

Michelle Pawlow:

I prefer being in the office in person, I do, because I love interacting with the team and so I try to come in as much as possible. The company is great in terms of just being flexible, especially because I live alone. If I have, you know, to pick up an Ikea shipment or anything like that, I do work from home every now and then. But being here is kind of what I enjoy.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. You know, that's a trend we're seeing around the world. I think that a lot of people actually, mid-career maybe... seems there's a lot of talk about that millennials all over want to actually work hybrid, or mostly remote work, versus people like yourself and new graduates entering the workforce really want to be in the office as much



as possible for that connectivity and being with people. And that's especially important for you in a place where you're new to, right, so you really need to create those bonds.

Michelle Pawlow:

Exactly, I definitely see the benefit of both. I have some friends who kind of work remotely and travel around Europe. Actually, one of my friends just came to visit me this weekend, he's doing that exact thing. And I think that lifestyle is also super fascinating and interesting. But to your point, yeah, establishing the connections, especially early on in my career, coming into a new country, and imagining myself with this company for a long time too – having those in person connections is really helpful. And I enjoy it a lot.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. So there's so much positive here... What do you like best about your job, your international lifestyle now?

Michelle Pawlow:

Good, I'm glad you're asking me all the positives, it's awesome. I can never quite sit still. So I love that being here there's always something challenging, in a good way, something new to experience. So I'm constantly learning, I'm adapting to my surroundings, I'm getting out of my comfort zone and just watching myself, push myself and evolve over time as a person. So I think the experience as a whole just really helps build confidence. It affirms that you can manage things independently and do things that you didn't think you could do. So things like taking a solo trip to a new country, or learning to speak a new language or negotiating with a supplier in China, for example. All of these things, I never would have thought that I could manage until I got here and just did it. And ABI is such a high energy and interesting place to work. And especially being in the office with people who are from all around the world, I love hearing stories about everyone's different cultures and past experiences. So, for me having this role and being in this location is just about the best I could have imagined and I'm really grateful for it.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful. But since you mentioned it, what are some of the things that you don't like as much and some of the challenges? Because it's not... it can't all be perfect every day...

Michelle Pawlow:

Of course, no, exactly. And I think, I kind of alluded to this earlier, but sometimes, you know, you just have to be very comfortable with the idea that you are, you're gonna... there's gonna be some things back home that you don't have. So like Trader Joe's, for some reason, like, this is not a paid ad or sponsorship but I do miss my Trader Joe's grocery store. And so small things like that. And again, nothing drastic, but just the daily habits that I had formed for living 22 years in the same country that you, you know, start to miss a little bit over time. But then, when I do get home to visit around the holidays, or whatever it is, I get to re-experience all of my favorite things from back in the US all over again. So...

Stacie Berdan:

Great, that's great. So this has been a terrific, very positive, uplifting, uplifting conversation about your job, and I imagine for listeners, it's extremely heartening, inspiring, and motivating to hear that it can be done the way you've done it. So thanks for that. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you want to add?

Michelle Pawlow:

Yeah... No, it's been a positive conversation, the experience has been positive. It's good that it's reflective of that. I think, overall, you know, I would encourage anyone listening who's thinking about moving and working



internationally to take a leap of faith and do it, you're pretty much guaranteed to learn something new about yourself and the people around you. And I know when I look back on my experience, even as I'm currently going through it, right, it's already been one that has changed the trajectory of my life and has really shaped a big part of who I am. So, go for it, talk to people, I think, learn as much as you can, going into it. And take advantage of the resources that your school or work has to offer, and do your research and don't be shy about connecting with people who have had similar experiences and asking them for help. So, no matter what the outcome will be, I think it's an experience that I really don't think you will regret.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful. Thank you, Michelle, and best of continued luck to you in your career. And I look forward to seeing all the amazing things that you do in the next decade or two. Thanks for that.

Michelle Pawlow:

Thanks so much Stacie, it was fun chatting with you.

Stacie Berdan:

Take care...

[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!