



Season 4, Episode 6 – Working Abroad in Sweden

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[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, we're heading to Sweden to talk with Goran Koprivnjak Scrum Master and Digital Business Integration Specialist at Accenture Song. Goran grew up in Croatia and speaks English and German in addition to his native Croatian. He's a GW alum, having studied International Business, including taking several classes with Professor Anna Helm, while also serving as captain of the swimming team. He's lived in Stockholm now for five years and works on projects across Europe. In his spare time, he enjoys riding his motorcycle and exploring the magnificent natural environment across all of Sweden. But his spare time has decreased exponentially recently as he and his wife have twins who are under two years old. Welcome, Goran, thanks so much for being with us.

Goran Koprivnjak:

Hey Stacy, glad to be here. Thanks for giving me the opportunity.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, it's great. We are so excited to have you as a GW International Business alum, and a student athlete, which I don't think we've ever featured before. So, I think this would be a great conversation for our listeners. So, let's dive in. One of the first questions we always like to ask to set the stage and provide some context. Can you describe to us what it is you do? No the title, just what do you do every day?

Goran Koprivnjak:

Yeah, so I'm a consultant in IT. And as consultant, that basically means that you do a bunch of different things, depending on the client's needs. But most recently, for the last few years, I've been serving as a Scrum Master. And since we're speaking about IT specifically, there's this new way of working that's called Agile, and inside this way of working, there's some specific roles that each team needs to have. And one of the roles is the Scrum Master. And what I basically do on a day-to-day basis – big things such as facilitate the events that are mandatory under this way of working. So, you essentially host the meetings, you drive them, you sort of go into the detail and nitpick, you know, like, what kind of issues is the team facing. And then, once you figure that out, you essentially help them solve it. And maybe another thing would be you sort of serve as a protector of the team, let's say. So, every team gets a lot of requests from external stakeholders. And rather than, you know, like people going directly to your programmers or developers, they go to you. So, you essentially serve as a proxy for your team. Meaning that, you know, you kind



of push forward any requests that cannot be done at the time, or, you know, if something is super high priority, you bring that to the team for discussion. But the role is very wide, you have a lot of freedom, you know, to basically doing the role as you see fit. But what it is – it's essentially support for your team that then delivers the actual, you know, code let's say, or the program that you were using.

Stacie Berdan:

Oh, that's so interesting. But you studied IB, not IT? Right. So how did you make the leap, or pivot to that kind of job?

Goran Koprivnjak:

Yeah, that's a good question. So, when I studied it, I didn't really have any focus on the IT specifically, but my first job in the industry was as a project manager. And I sort of went into it because he's, you know, project management, which is to extend what I studied, and it was international firm. And then, when I joined, I realized oh, this is like, it's way more IT than actual project management in traditional sense that you think of. And yes, sort of, from that junior project management role, as you dig deeper into the IT, you learn more things, I eventually got to this role, simply because I like to work with people more than the spreadsheets and technology in this – this role allows me to do that. So, I have more touch with the actual, you know, people doing things rather than just staring at Excel and, you know, crunching numbers.

Stacie Berdan:

Okay, yeah, that's great and interesting that you actually were able to identify that pivot quickly, get the skills that you needed, and then do the job. That's great. But how did you end up in Sweden? So, you grew up in Croatia went to school in the US, and then now you're in Sweden. So tell us about that.

Goran Koprivnjak:

Yes. So, I can go back to the start. So high school junior in Croatia, I didn't really know what I want to do in life, like most of the people at that age. The one thing that I was doing was I was swimming. And I have a few older guys that went to the States to college before me, from Croatia. And I sort of like realized – look, if I want to continue swimming, I essentially you know, I have to pick whether I want to stay in Croatia and go to college, focus on college, or I could try and go to the States, get a scholarship, and sort of mix the two. And that's exactly what happened. So, for the first few years, I actually got a scholarship at Iowa Central Community College, where I studied...I got an Associate's degree, so I did a lot of general studying. And then after two years, I transferred to GW where I enrolled into International Business. And of course, I continued swimming there. Once I graduated, I went back to Croatia, where I got my first job, like I mentioned, so it was junior project manager. And after, I want to say about a year, I just couldn't really find myself there. I spent four years in the States, I liked the environment, I liked something different. And then going back home, I just didn't see myself there for the long term. So, at the job that I was doing at the time, I also met my current wife. And we just decided, you know, let's try to go somewhere in Europe and see, you know, like how we will be to work somewhere and live somewhere for a couple of years. No strings attached. No, no trial period, we just kind of decided to go for it and see where the road takes us. The one application that are sent to Sweden is the one that came back. I've never visited Sweden before. I've never been to Stockholm. But I came here for one of the interviews. I liked it. They offered me the job. And yeah, I accepted it. And here we are five years later, right.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great! So yeah, so you just went for it! I love the story. And even meeting a partner, super important that your partner, right, wants to also have this kind of global career – that is to move out of Croatia and work across Europe. So that's great. So, what is it like to live and work in Stockholm?



Goran Koprivnjak:

Yeah, so we loved it. Initially, once you move here, depending on time of the year, the new moving, it might be a bit rougher. So, we moved in the middle of the winter and that was a big change for us. So, coming from Croatia, that has quite balanced four seasons, we basically came here, you know, in the middle of the winter, and had another four or five months of darkness and cold. And I'd say that is probably one of the biggest minuses of living here, you just have to get used to, you know, more darkness, less sunlight, in general, colder, wetter than most other places maybe in Southern Europe. But everything else has been a big plus for us. So, the country, the whole country, not just Stockholm, is very beautiful. Like you mentioned before, the nature is essentially widespread everywhere. One of the biggest things that we like is that you work and live in the capital, but maybe 15 minutes of car drive, and you're in the middle of the forest and you hear no cars, you have no contact with the city. And we really love it. It's surrounded by water, you essentially have this massive archipelago, that's, that's super beautiful. The standard of life is quite high, especially compared to the Eastern Europe where Croatia is. So salaries are much better, benefits are much better, the country is quite developed, especially in IT... So, if you look at, you know, the companies that are here that have headquarters here, such as Spotify, or Klarna, you know, for these IT giants, let's say, a lot of opportunities into industries would be here in Stockholm. And then you know, you maybe have some things that people don't consider right away. But now that we have kids, you know, the whole system is structured quite well, around the well-being of children. And all social structure is quite... it doesn't get much better than it is here, let's say. Yeah, I think that summarizes it quite well.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, that's great. That's so... It sounds like a wonderful place to live, all told, if you can actually deal with the cold and the darkness. Can you shed some light on how things are different from a business perspective, like a business environment, right, business etiquette, cultural nuances... And since you've been in three major, like the US, Croatia and Sweden, you know, even maybe compare/contrast what it's like the business environments?

Goran Koprivnjak:

Yeah, that's a great question. So, I would say first and foremost, and you know, people usually say that, but maybe, you know, unless you actually have been here, you don't really get a sense, but there is really a very good work-life balance here in Sweden. If you work nine to five, you work nine to five, there is no staying extra or staying late if you're in a Swedish company with mainly Swedish people. So it's very ingrained in the culture, like nobody will expect it from you, you're fine to leave early to pick up your kids from kindergarten. And that's something that we really like. But on the contrary, let's say I worked a lot with multinational clients and multinational teams, and I basically had experienced, on my own how some other countries work. I worked a lot of with Italian teams and I worked with Indian teams, and I was coming from Croatia. So I had that input and I can say that, so work-life balance would be maybe the extreme of how good it can get here, compared to maybe Italy or the States, you know, where the line is very thin, especially when you're young in the industry, like, it's expected of you to just, you know, sit down and prove yourself, you never go home before your bosses do, the work basically never stops; you're here to, you know, work, go home, sleep and come back. And that's something that I know for some people it works, for some people it doesn't. But I would say that that is maybe the biggest plus here. Then another thing, maybe dimension would be that in the States (well, I didn't specifically work in States, but since I lived there for four years) I would say that maybe the hierarchical structure of the business world is, you know, it's kind of in a pyramid. So, you clearly know who, let's say, the CEO is, who are the managers, and then who are, you know, let's say, should be analysts or people on the lower levels. But in Sweden, the business structure across the board is very flat. So you essentially, once you walk in the office, and I had this experience when I just came here, I mean, you were in the elevator with someone who's essentially senior manager, or, you know, like CEO of your company, and you don't even know because these people don't stand out, they chat with you like, like, they chat... like you chat with other coworkers. So, the titles don't really mean anything outside, you know, like, strictly business decisions. Like people don't carry that, you know, around as sort of like – look bro, I'm the CEO here, so you need to schedule a meeting with me. It's nothing like this. And my sense was that it was very much like that in the States. And also in Italy, like, there is a lot



of that, you know, where you kind of have levels. If you want to speak with someone above you, you need to follow these steps. But here, it's very flat. And that's really nice. Because, you know, you get a lot of valuable input or you know, like, you can ask for a lot of advice. You just have, you know, access to this knowledge that is usually sort of like, yeah, not accessible right away unless you climb the corporate structure.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, that's great. I mean, sounds very practical, reasonable, and a way to get much more efficient, getting things done. Yeah. So, working – you said you work with teams regionally and around the world – do you sense that dynamic tension that kind of exists when you work beyond, you know, one's own culture; at least within the country where things begin to tug and pull in different time zones and different ways of doing that business, especially ones that maybe consider you got to work until the job's done (not just the nine to five)? Have you experienced that?

Goran Koprivnjak:

Yeah, absolutely. Especially in IT, I think, as far as the time zone goes, IT as a whole has been quite good to adjust to that, you know, like, some people just work different times to adjust to the other time zones or the time zone of the client. But the work-life balance in these teams is quite noticeable. So you can definitely sense you know, when there's work that's due, and then you know, you can have a team from one part of the world really pushing for it, you know, regardless of what time it is, maybe you already do hours overtime, you have other plans, but they just, you know, they push – let's finish this, and then we can go... but then, here in Sweden, you will never have that here, you know. People will just close their laptop, they wouldn't really ask for permission from anyone, it's just, you know – I came here to do my job, it's five o'clock, now I've done what I could have in, you know, since nine to five, and my workday ends here, essentially. And then if you look at, let's say, if we put Croatia in this mix, you'd kind of have just kind of a golden middle. So, I would say, it really depends, you know, if it's something that's really important, you can tell that to people and people will usually, you know, like, they'll be willing to stay, put in the extra effort, especially, you know, if they work on a project they know that it's valuable for them, they will be very open to stay. But at the same time, you cannot push them too far, you know, before they would kind of rebel, let's say, you know. They wouldn't just stay at work for you know, five hours extra every day just to finish the work because that's not what the culture is like. So, you can really notice that, even, you know, when you work with remote teams, you're never in person, it's mostly online. And it's very rarely, you know, like face to face. So, you have to kind of manage these, you know, like, you don't see their face expressions, usually, unless the cameras are on. There's a lot of stuff that is intangible, you know, you have to work around, to figure out what the... you know, what are people actually thinking. It's one thing when someone writes it to you but you hear their tone of voice sometimes... like a lot of stuff happens, just, you know, via emails or via typing. So, with the experience, you kind of get to know these cultural differences. And there are many. And then you figure out, you know, how to manage each of these teams from different parts of the world. But yes, most definitely, I would say that cultural differences are huge.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, sounds tricky. Can you give a tip or two how – obviously time and experience, that's one – but can you give a tip or two how, for listeners who may be actually entering into this space, and how they can actually learn a little faster?

Goran Koprivnjak:

Yeah, I would say experience is very critical. And one of the things, you know, like traveling around the world and just being open to new ideas and, you know, experiencing different cultures, you right away, you're kind of more open towards – okay, like, these people are different from us, they work in different ways, their set of values is different. So essentially what it comes down to is, you know, like, be a good listener, and people will generally, you know, like, express what it is that, you know, like they want or what they deem good or bad. So, let's say, for example, if, if you work with someone from Sweden, you have good chances that they will tell you – okay, it's five o'clock,



now it's time to go home for me – and then you don't push them anymore, you know, because that's like, they're gone by this time. But maybe if you work with someone from India, for example, you know, like, you could push them for a bit longer, and they will maybe not push back, you know, they will not tell you; but over time, you kind of get a sense of... okay, like, these peoples have lives, and they will give you these small hints, you know, maybe I need to do this, or I need to do that, or next day maybe they show up a bit late because they, you know, do something that maybe they should have done last night when they worked, and so on... So, I think being a good listener, and just overall respect that there's different cultures in the world and people act differently... So, we're not all the same. And it's very important in the business sense, especially if you work with other people and if you want to be a good manager – it's one of the biggest things.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, excellent advice. Thank you for that. That's great. Um, do you have other advice or tips for any of our listeners who are thinking about moving or considering a job in Sweden?

Goran Koprivnjak:

So, I would say, you know, in general, when people talk about Scandinavia and Nordic countries, they usually say that people are “cold”. But it just means that, you know, once you move here, you might have a hard time finding, you know, like your group of friends. So, if you move here, you should, I'd say, at least expect to spend here year after year and a half before you can make any conclusions. So I know a lot of people that tend to move here, and then you know, they don't like it, because they didn't find their group of people, and they tend to go away. So, wherever you move be it Sweden or another place, you just give yourself a time period of between a year-and-a-half or two, so you actually get to experience what it's really like. Don't judge anything at the first sight. It's definitely a bad practice. So, if you come here, just, you know, go with the flow, it's probably not going to be super easy at the start. But after a while, I think you'll find a group of people and you know, you will, you'll have a great time. At the end of the day, it's a very multicultural city, and the whole country is very English friendly. And there are a lot of people like myself, or you know, anyone basically from around the world that comes here. So it's quite easy to get into, you know, find a circle of people that are in the same shoes, but you have to be very proactive, and you know, like reach out and find out for yourself, because people will not be maybe as, as open as they would be in the States, you know, for hanging out for giving you advice or anything like that.

Stacie Berdan:

Yes, you have to work a little harder. Is that one of the ways that you have had to adapt to living there, kind of working a little harder to make friends and, and giving yourself time?

Goran Koprivnjak:

Yeah, absolutely. And a lot of things here. Basically, a lot of, let's say, social interactions revolve around activities. Because it's cold outside, or it's dark, a lot of people do different activities, especially during the winter. And that's also how you meet people. So maybe that will be the second best advice that I could do – just go out in the city and do different things. You know, like, you can go and play badminton, you can go play indoor soccer, you can go swimming, you can go play board games with someone... But essentially, you know, whatever you like to do, just go outside the city and find these activities. And this is usually how you find people that, you know, yeah, that will fit your social needs let's say, that's how you find friends. And that's also what we have done. And it worked fine for us. And you end up with your, you know, new circle of friends, that is based on, you know, the activities that you have been doing.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, how wonderful, that's wonderful. It's really, you know, it sounds very kind of simple and straightforward. But it's very important, what you've just described. It's really kind of changing, and being flexible and adaptable to your



new environment, sensing what's out there, and how to make it work for yourself... Because you got this great job, you like it, you like living there, you know, it's wonderful, but it's not always very easy, and you have to take the extra effort. So, thanks for that. What do you think, besides some of that – you've described a lot of the challenges and benefits – but if you take a couple of steps back... So you've worked internationally now for five plus years, you're obviously pretty global. What do you see as some of the biggest benefits of working internationally?

Goran Koprivnjak:

Well, most certainly the biggest benefit is that, especially in IT, you can travel the world, you know, while working. And that, especially in IT and historically, it hasn't been the case. You know, a lot of these big companies, you have to move where the headquarters are, you have to work there, you're kind of stuck in one city. But nowadays, you're basically free to almost work from any place you want in the world. And it doesn't just have to be Europe and the States, you know, you can go to Asia, it doesn't really matter. I think that is really the biggest benefit and you know, portable globalization that is invaluable for someone, especially young. Because that is, this is the time, you know, especially before you get the family, you know, maybe before you buy a house, like you really have the opportunity, you know, to get all this knowledge and travel around. And this is also how you climb the ladder faster, you know, this is how you gain knowledge. This is how you gain more experiences that will, down the road, bring you into the role that you really want to do. If it's you know, maybe you don't get the ideal role or the role of your dreams right away, but a few years down the road, as long as you expose yourself, I would say – just go out there and you know, travel a bit. And that's probably the biggest benefit of this time that we live in.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, definitely. Well said. And as you said earlier, be open to meeting these other people, being open to actually... the differences, because that's where a lot of that learning, right, takes place as well. So again, yeah, for maybe like a 30,000-foot view – what do you see on the horizon? So, you've been out of college for a while, good couple of years, right, in the workforce, doing a lot, living in a lot of different places... What do you see for people graduating now? What do they need to be aware of and prepared for, for the future? Besides the globalization piece, which you just mentioned...

Goran Koprivnjak:

Yeah, I think it's becoming quite more competitive every year, say, that the skill gap of you know, like, junior compared to senior is less than... and again, I mainly speak from the IT perspective because this is what I know... But maybe ten years ago, when someone was hiring a senior, there was a person with five to ten years of experience. But now, if you think about it, most of the technologies that we work with are only maybe one, two or three years old. So you cannot find someone you know, with five years of experience in a technology that's been here for only two years. So for a lot of younger people, you know, if you really dig into, you know, the technology or whatever you're working with, for a couple of years, you no longer have to spend, you know, like ten years to become a manager or, you know, you don't have to grind for ten years to get into the role that you really like to do, and which has sort of been the standard in the past. And when I was studying that was sort of the expected, you know, you enter the workforce, you do a lot of grunt work maybe, and then you eventually become this manager that you were always talking about. But now this gap is, you know, it's much smaller than it used to be. So once you get into the workforce, you know, look for the newer things, the changes that are happening regardless of the industry, and then jump onto that train, you know, and that will basically bring you up to speed way faster in the industry. Because you essentially are jumping on something that is brand new, so no one has experienced it before. And you can be one of the first movers. And that's how you become more successful. And that's also one of the things that I have done here. And it's helped me greatly to, you know, climb up the ladder, but also, you know, meet more people become more proficient in my job and at the same time, just over time, you know, like, as the technology moves on, you also become more senior, and you've been there from the start. So, it's a great thing to be somewhere from the start. And maybe, historically, it hasn't been like that.



Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, super smart advice. I love it. We're coming to the end of our conversation, but I want to ask a few more questions. One... go back to the personal... So Sweden – you said it yourself, beautiful country, archipelago surrounded by water and nature and green, nature-lovers dream location essentially. What's it like? What do you do on the weekends? Tell us some fun stuff.

Goran Koprivnjak:

Yeah, so I mean, it's... I'd say, it depends on what time of the year you come here it's definitely two different lives that you live. So now, when it's sort of... we're closing in on the winter time, let's say, I would say you have to suffer through it. So now this is the time of the year that you spend more and more time indoors and less time outside. So, essentially what you do is you make a cozy place for yourself, and then you either read books, you know, you do whatever you enjoy inside. But then when it's summertime, essentially nobody's at home ever. And you just go outside. People enjoy the smallest things. It's one of the great things here that I haven't experienced before. So as soon as the summer comes, to see the rays of sunshine, you see everyone outside on the lawns, you know, everyone's just sunbathing or just sitting or drinking coffee. People like to... they know how to enjoy the small things here. And that's one of the things that I also like. But other than that, yeah, you just fill your life with, you know, with different activities. There is a lot of things going on in the city. You can go kayaking on any given day. You know, you can go to a bunch of different concerts, especially during the summertime. Nature is all around, like national parks. If you want to experience the extremes from maybe what New York City would be – the big city life – I would say that this is completely the opposite side of that, you know. You still get basically almost all the benefits of big city, but you get less of the... I don't want to say bad stuff, because some people like it... but you get more nature, let's say like, you know, more natural side of things.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah. Well, that sounds like a great place to be. So, as we wrap up, I just want to ask you one last question, because this has been a wonderful conversation, Goran. Is there anything else that you want to add that you haven't, that you feel that you haven't shared, that you want listeners to know about?

Goran Koprivnjak:

Yeah, so maybe the last advice that I would have, and I wish I used it up more, especially for people at GW, you're in the center of the world, per se. Just go out and find a mentor. Go out and find someone, you know... Like, I found my mentor while I was swimming at the pool, and I had no idea that the person was let's say, in a high position in one of the big governmental agencies. And he helped me immensely. And he's probably one of the reasons why I also moved internationally. So, say, like, go outside and find someone that you can, you know... you don't have to talk to that person every day... But just find someone who's willing to share their knowledge with you. And if they're from an international background, that's even better. But just like, find a mentor, and see what they can teach you, that's probably the best word of advice that I can give you. Because they will basically tailor it to, you know, like, to who you are, and to what you want to be enlightened and to your aspirations. And it's these small advices that you get over time, that kind of sticks in your mind, and then down the road, you remember them and you use that knowledge, and then you end up doing what you like, or you know, what, what you always wanted to do in life, but it's all because of these, you know, small things that add up over time.

Stacie Berdan: Yeah, that's great advice. And one of the things that GW and the GW-CIBER team does is bring things like this podcast or other people to campus that people maybe can learn some things that way, maybe their mentor, maybe they're not a mentor... But you're right – taking advantage of actually getting out there and listening is just wonderful advice. Thank you so much, Goran, it's been a privilege to speak with you. I appreciate your taking time out of your very busy day with work and the twins. So, thank you and good luck.



Goran Koprivnjak:

Thank you Stacey, it was pleasure to be here.

[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!