



Season 2, Episode 6 – International Tax Management

Nazia Manji, International Tax Manager, Assurant
Stacie Berdan, International Careers Expert (Podcast Host)

[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 2 we find ourselves in a fast-changing world still affected by the pandemic where we must adapt to succeed. Come with us as we share with you how to craft your place in the new global work space. Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Naz Manji – a Certified Public Accountant in both the US and Canada, who is an international tax manager at Assurant, an insurance company that provides lifestyle and housing solutions that support, protect, and connect major consumer purchases. Working for a Fortune 500 company with a presence in 21 countries, Naz appreciates the opportunity to be able to connect and build relationships with people from different walks of life from her office in Atlanta. She speaks seven languages and has visited more than fifty countries. Welcome Naz, it is so great to have you here with us today!

Nazia Manji:

Thanks Stacie, I am truly honored to be here today.

Stacie Berdan:

Great! Let's get started! One of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there. So tell us about your job at Assurant – what does an international tax manager do?

Nazia Manji:

Well, Assurant is an international insurance company with presence in over 21 different tax jurisdictions. So what does that mean for an international tax manager? Well, lots and lots and lots of tax filings! And compliance requirements. And in order for me to meet my deadlines I work very close with teammates across the globe – may it be Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, parts of Europe, and many, many more. This role requires a great set of organizational skills, patience, understanding of different cultural norms, and the ability to adapt to continuous changes in the tax law. When time permits, I really enjoy participating in those ad hoc projects that come my way. And believe it or not, that's the most exciting part I have found about my role, because it allows me to keep on top of my education, and learn those new tax laws that come on an annual basis and apply them to my knowledge bank.

Stacie Berdan:

That sounds great. So you are working all over the world on a regular basis, learning new skills, dealing with compliance and those kinds of things, and laws – that's wonderful, sounds really interesting. And all from Atlanta, which is wonderful. Before the pandemic, did you travel much?

Nazia Manji:

Yes... Not for work. For leisure and pleasure for the most part. When I was in university, the question I always asked my mentors or people that interviewed me was what is one regret that they had. All of them, believe it or not, said they wished they travelled when they had the opportunity. So, I took that at heart and try to make a dent on that



world map. You think fifty countries is a lot, but if you really put it in percentage that's only 25% of the countries we have in the world. So, I still have a lot of travelling left.

Stacie Berdan:

Absolutely. And the borders, as they open up, we will be doing more, which is great. So, you have an international job, but you're based in Atlanta – that's really good for our listeners to know. They don't have to pick up and move somewhere, they don't have to travel all the time if they don't want, since yours is more personal curiosity and pleasure. That's great. So, I know you also, beyond travelling, you speak seven languages, which is an amazing accomplishment. I only speak one – English... Tell us, which languages, how did you learn them, and are you able to use them in your global role?

Nazia Manji:

So, the languages I speak are not the most commonly used languages. And I'll start by telling you which languages those are – so, English of course, which is very common; Hindi is the second most common; Kiswahili and Kihaya – those are East African Languages; Gujarati, Kachi, Hindi – those are East Indian languages; Punjabi and Farsi – those are languages I'm starting to lose connection with because I don't get to practice them as much, so Farsi is with an asterisk right now, because it takes me a minute to get there. But in my current role I don't get to use these languages directly; however, I do, as you know, I do value what the ability to speak multiple languages has in terms of my personal development. I give a lot of credit to it, it allows me to adapt to change, to accept cultures and differentiate myself from the broader market and I value all those qualities. So even though it doesn't directly help me in my current role, it allows me to build all these relationships because it's fantastic to start a conversation with “hey, I speak several languages”.

Stacie Berdan:

Um-hum...And also I think it's applicable... as you said, even if you are not using... you might be using English anyway and maybe in your business dealings around the world, but just understanding that people think differently if their first language, or even their second language, is not English, right, and they think differently through those different lenses, and culture affects languages.... I imagine it really helps you work cross-culturally as well.

Nazia Manji:

I really do. And you know, at first I always thought that it's just something I am giving too much credit to, but I've asked some of my colleagues from different teams and the feedback they are giving me or the feedback I've heard is they do feel more comfortable talking to me because I am accepting and I am patient with them, and I'm inquisitive on some of the questions that most other people aren't as familiar with. So, I do think it does have an indirect tie to my role.

Stacie Berdan:

Right, that's great. So, for listeners who want to learn a language – learn a language, learn the one that you are most passionate about. You may or may not be able to use it directly in your role and work and professional situations, but it will help you regardless. That's great. So, for students who are interested in your industry, Naz, what are the greatest opportunities and challenges that you see today, and the ones you see coming down the pike in a couple of years?

Nazia Manji:

Stacie, that's a really interesting question. I mean, for those in the audience that follow tax law, you'll know that US tax law has been changing, and is continuously changing. And one of the highlighted areas of all these changes since the 2017 tax reform has been the international tax area. And I personally believe that this trend will continue as we move towards a more global mindset. Well, this creates a lot of new opportunities for those of you interested in the international tax area, because there's a lot more work than we saw pre-2017, and it's going to continue to grow in that direction. More and more companies are finding the benefit of having an in-house tax team to reduce



costs, which will allow more opportunities and give students the option to pick whether they decide to go the public accounting route or the industry route. Of course, with all of this there is the challenge of continuous learning, because every year tax law changes and the administrative requirements have continued to change.

Stacie Berdan:

That's very interesting. And so, many people think "tax = numbers, math...", but what kind of skills are needed in tax, besides... you described some great cross-cultural skills... but what kind of skills, what type of skills do international tax managers need?

Nazia Manji:

I think – critical thinking is becoming the norm, but for me personally, if the pandemic has taught us anything it's flexibility. Being OK, and thinking outside the box, and adapting to changes is becoming the norm. These are skills we don't learn in school but rather develop over experiences. And level of tolerance, more than ever adaptiveness is a priority. If I haven't beaten that one enough, the other ones that come to mind are social norm – we work in a global setting and most companies nowadays, whether it's a big, mid-size, public company – you will encounter colleagues, vendors, suppliers from different walks of the world. So it's becoming very critical to have that global mindset, being accepting, and being patient and understanding of the different cultures out there, now more than ever.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great, you put it so well. That's wonderful. For our listeners – you've got to understand the world, develop a global mindset, no matter what you job. That's great. And we've experienced so many changes in the past few years; and many related to the workplace are sticking with us. You mentioned, I think, remote work, hybrid schedules, we've got environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion... What trends do you see emerging in the workplace?

Nazia Manji:

I think there are two that really come to mind for me, and one is the new way of working – which is remote working. I think, quite frankly, remote working is here to stay, especially in the finance industry, right, because in the financial sector, our deadlines are so crucial. Sometimes the turn-around time is hours, sometimes it's yesterday and you're fighting that deadline. And the ability to do that from home, save time battling traffic (if you are in a high-traffic city like Atlanta) has really given employees the flexibility and the leisure to work at their own pace but yet meet the deadlines, if that makes any sense. The other trend that I'm really seeing, and it's very trendy now is ERGs. So, ERG stands for Employer Resource Groups. These started a few years back, and I think a lot of companies didn't see it quite a hit at it, even though they would sway you with swag or a free luncheon, because it was more in-person. And if you think about, if you are in finance for example or other parts of a back office, you usually have lots of work to keep up with, and attending these meetings in live isn't feasible. Now, switching to the remote work environment, and having Zoom team meetings – this option becomes a lot more feasible. Because a lot of people with similar interests can come together, whether it be for gender, for diversity, for hobbies, or similar interests – you can come together, build on a network within your current work structure. So, I do think it's going to take off with remote working...

Stacie Berdan:

That's really interesting, and a nice way to see the combination of the two trends coming together to deal with what we've got. And I do believe that people appreciate not being able... not being stuck in traffic getting to work, and having that extra time to meet the deadlines, as you so eloquently put that. And also, being able to meet with people and other offices around the world... that's great. Does Assurant have, obviously you guys have these types of groups, and are they working well?



Nazia Manji:

Actually, Assurant is in the process of launching its first, very first ERG, starting January 2022, so we are quite excited about that, and really hopeful, positive that it is going to take off, because it's a great trend, it's a great way for people to come together when you can't see your colleagues face to face.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, that's wonderful, great, good for you guys, good for Assurant. What other trends, what else do you see on the horizon that students entering the workforce, or people out of college a couple of years, need to be aware of and prepare for? What kind of tips do you have for them?

Nazia Manji:

For me, at least over the last ten years, robotics has gone more from a theoretical concept, one we saw in movies or heard about and didn't think it would be feasible, to something more of a reality, right... I've gone from a mindset of invasion of a... robotics being invasion to acceptance. I think automation is the way of the future. While it eliminates redundant tasks, it also allows people to focus on more value-added roles. So what does that really mean? Well, the next-generation workforce will have the opportunity to go far and beyond what we've imagined today, and for that I do envy you guys. But what it also does is it takes out those easy tasks that most of us fulfill in our day-to-day roles, and you will see more of critical-thinking roles out there. So, for those who are looking at accounting going forward, you'll need to be just as good in technology as you are in your technical skills.

Stacie Berdan:

Hm, that's an important point, because most people don't see it...they say "oh no, that's tech over there, you know, computer science, programming...", but you are saying that it's needed and to understand this AI that's entering the workplace. We can't fight it, so we really have to accept it and see the good that it brings. So, you've got a global mindset, you've mentioned it a couple of times... We know globalization has changed the world, we've experienced it... But not every student, every person, wants a global job. As someone who has this mindset and you enjoy working cross-culturally, you are passionate about – what specific advice do you have for those who may not have it, who don't have the same language skills, haven't even left the United States, what tips do you have for them?

Nazia Manji:

I mean, for us to not think or accept that we are going in a global economy version, would be a setback, right. Because even if you work for a domestic company, the changes of that company having vendors in different parts of the world or suppliers – that's a high probability. So, like you said, for me I mean, languages has been the way I connect with people, but for those that don't speak more than one language, I guess I would say – be understanding, welcome the different cultures, and differences in people. Because that will establish friendship and build a network. I mean, just take it back to yesterday – I was talking to a bank advisor from LatAm – and our call was... we went way above our scheduled time slot, because we got talking about languages and culture, and, you know, he'd done a lot of travelling... So what that did for me in the end – he really went over and beyond what was expected of him in terms of guiding me on a form, he actually helped me complete that. So, because I was able to build that relationship, my job just got ten times easier. I got the help from someone who was more familiar in this specific environment, and with a smile was able to help me do that. So I think it's very important, even if you don't speak another language, be culturally accepting and broaden your horizon when it comes to travelling.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah... What a beautiful story, thanks for sharing, I love that. Just the human connectivity, even though it was on Zoom and not in person – you were still able to have that, which is a beautiful thing, for sure. Wow... I'd like to turn now and ask you to share some lessons from your own career. What's a tactic you've used in dealing with change (we've all experienced so much change) at any time through your career, how has it helped?



Nazia Manji:

I'd say I have a mantra that echoes change, I can't emphasize enough: force yourself to move beyond the status quo. Accountants are known for their steadiness. We don't like change. But I think being adaptive to change will help your job and will make you get more efficient. You'll be able to get more out of the time you have if you are able to think outside the box and move towards a more efficient way of doing it. For me personally, when I take on any task I always sit back and ask "is there a better way of doing it, why am I doing this, what's the purpose, can I reduce the amount of time we've been spending on it?", and from there I start building the work paper or a memo. A lot of times, more times than I want, it's a disaster and it's not what the audience were looking for. But that one time when it does turn out to be an effective way of looking at a task, it does save that much more time for the company and for yourself.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, that's good, I love it. And really looking at things differently, that's good. Change as a mantra, mantra is change... that's great. Because there is no doubt – change is constant in our lives and I think ramping up even faster these days. This has been a wonderful conversation, Naz, I really appreciate it. But before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to add, to make sure that our listeners hear from you?

Nazia Manji:

Yes, for my listeners – don't take 'No' for an answer, the real secret to success is the aptitude. If you have the mindset for it, everything is possible. If Sir Richard Branson could take us to space just off a dream, think what else we can achieve just by having the attitude that we can do it.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great, beautiful advice. Thank you so much Naz, this has been a real pleasure having this conversation with you. Thanks again.

Nazia Manji:

Thanks, Stacie.

[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!