



Season 4, Episode 4 – Working Abroad in the UK

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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 across the pond to the UK, London specifically, to speak with Jessica Forman, who works in HR for Amazon with a title UK People Priorities Lead, Mental Health and Well-being, Future of Work. Just moved to London from Seattle during the pandemic, but she made arguably an equally big move by pivoting her career from education to HR after receiving her Master's degree in Leadership and Organizational Performance at Vanderbilt. She began her career with Teach for America, and now works in HR for one of the largest companies in the world. And she speaks Spanish. Welcome, Jess, great to have you with us today.

Jessica Forman:

Thanks, Stacie.

Stacie Berdan:

So, I've really been looking forward to our interview because I want to hear about your colorful career so far. But let's first start with what you're doing now. Your job - UK People Priorities Lead – tell us, what is it that you do?

Jessica Forman:

Well, I have to be upfront and honest, I'm still figuring that out. But the role's scope is running all initiatives regarding mental health and well-being and future of work for our UK employees within Amazon. And what that translates to is really building a community and environment that provides resources and overall support around mental health. As we know, it's incredibly connected to what people feel they can do in their job and how they show up every day. The Future of Work bit is innovative and a little bit more, I would say, hard to describe. We're sort of looking at the new change in businesses these days and figuring out what it looks like to work in a company. On the back end of the pandemic, lots of organizations are focused on flexible working, where people work. And we want to make sure we're not just on par, but doing the best that we can to be Earth's best employer, which is a recent leadership principle we added to our other fourteen.



Stacie Berdan:

That is fantastic to hear, especially such a large and influential employer like Amazon. So that's great. That's great. And you work in London, a dream city for so many people, yes, so many people that I... that I meet... How did you do it? How did you go from Seattle to London?

Jessica Forman:

It wasn't as easy as I expected. I had the intention of living abroad from college. After studying abroad fell in love with Spain where I spent a semester, and had in mind the idea of eventually going back to somewhere outside of the States and living for a year or two or more. And felt that Amazon actually would be a really good conduit to getting abroad. And then started to work internally and realized that the assignments which are roles that people go across the pond or go abroad doing are limited in time and have the same pay scale as they would in the States, which often is much higher, and get stipends and get support with moving and living. And those were very hard to come by at Amazon, super coveted and very specific in who they needed and who goes over. And so, I looked for the opportunity and got a bit ahead of where I wanted to go and when by just networking with people internally who were in international business organizations that had, potentially, opportunities open for me and connected with the leader and there wasn't a role. Five weeks later, she called me up and said we have an opening and it's in London. Are you interested? I said sign me up!

Stacie Berdan:

Great. So, prepped yourself, knew you wanted it, studied abroad, looked for the opportunity, went with a big company, raised your hand, connected, networked with people, and took the one that was offered to you which is great, too. Awesome. Awesome. What's it like to live and work in London?

Jessica Forman:

It is exciting, for sure. You pointed out a big ... an interesting choice that I made... a big decision, which was to move abroad in the middle of the pandemic. And so, I'm not gonna sugarcoat it, it was a tough start. And with London being so big and vibrant, and all of the opportunity to travel that comes with living in London was gone, when I came over, which I thought was a nice way to sort of get introduced into the city. But oh, man, when things started opening up, I really realized how much there is, and I'm still exploring. So, it's really nice to be able to sort of continuously explore, and I never feel like I know the city well enough to say that I don't have, you know, places to learn about. And even with work, too, there's... London's amazing, but there's such interesting distance, close distance to Edinburgh and Ireland where I get to go often as well. So, it's great. It can be a bit overwhelming. It's definitely fast paced, similar to New York City. But it's really nice that there's a sentiment that's a bit different than Americans that focuses and values work life balance. So, I've worked to take that on.

Stacie Berdan:

Well, it's great. So I'm assuming based on your, your statement, that the work life balance is “work is not everything”. And people have more balanced and more personal time and freedom and interesting things to do – interesting that are not part of work.

Jessica Forman:

Absolutely. And there's a pretty clear distinction that people make between the time they spent personally and the time that they are at work. And I don't I don't mean in terms of connecting with people and being human. But I mean, in the fact that when they're on holiday, they're on holiday, they don't answer the pings. They don't respond to the emails, which I really respect.



Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, respect. So important. That's a great point. I would not have known that. So thanks for pointing that out. That's a really interesting point for our listeners to know about working there. It's not just this fast paced, great, fabulous city, one of the best in the world. But there's that balance. Yeah. Who knew? That's great.

Jessica Forman:

Yeah, it's a really nice addition to some of the feeling of the rat race, so...

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah. Can you shed some light on some of the other things that may be different, especially from the US, since that's where you lived before and worked before? Business etiquette, cultural nuances, those kinds of things?

Jessica Forman:

Well, I'll start with a story. The cultural nuances, cultural nuances, excuse me, I didn't think we're going to be as obvious as they came to be. And it really starts with language. So, I figured come to London, easy transition English to English, the English spoken in London and the UK beyond is very different, as I'm sure many of the listeners know. And words are not the same. So oftentimes, I will use a word that's inappropriate. And a couple of times have been called out on saying something that's completely normal in the US, that is just a completely different meaning and not super appropriate in the business setting. Which can be embarrassing, but always a good learning opportunity, especially when you have a kind colleague pointed out. But the one example, was obviously working in mental health, and we had comms, communications piece go out. And the communications director suggested that we say, grab a cuppa and take this survey about mental health. I had no idea what 'a cuppa' was, and then later it was grab a brew, take the survey. To me a brew is a beer. And so I assumed a cuppa and a brew sort of went hand in hand with alcohol. And I got pretty concerned and called out you know, I don't think we should be suggested people grab a beer and take a mental health survey and was quickly told that it actually was in reference to tea. So the language is quite different. Yeah, it was. Thankfully, everybody was very kind and generous in their understanding. And oftentimes, I just sort of poke fun at myself and say, you know, the American in me, needs to practice better English. The other piece that's really interesting, specifically about Brits, and I guess in general the UK is the approach to confrontation. It's a very closed off culture in terms of confrontation. There's not a ton of open conversation, the kind of conflict that might exist isn't often named. And instead, there's a little bit of an element of passive aggressiveness or nuanced sort of language that suggests either taking offense to something that somebody else said or not being comfortable. And it's really difficult at times to navigate what is the message. So that's been interesting. And then I would say one of the most amazing positive elements to the living in London is that everybody is interested in learning about each other, it is so international. And there are so many people that have real interest in learning about other places, other cultures, other languages... I didn't realize how incredibly diverse and how incredibly engulfed in that cultural difference people are within London. And it's on a, you know, weekends basis that folks go to Istanbul or to Spain. So that part's really, really nice as well

Stacie Berdan:

Fascinating. That's great, great, great pointers and diving in deep. So thanks for sharing, especially your experience and your examples. I imagine that cultural difference, the approach to confrontation may actually bleed into global teams and creating, you know, an added dimension to that dynamic tension that exists between individual countries and global headquarters, regional teams, maybe related to that topic, or others, or you know, that particular approach or the difference in approaching confrontation. But have you had experiences with those types of things, the dynamic tension working around the world?



Jessica Forman:

Yes. And I know we're on a podcast so you can't see me, but I am aggressively shaking my head 'Yes'. Yes, yes, this is a big piece of the dynamic tension in your reference. The interesting element, I think working at such a large company like Amazon that is global, is that we're based in Seattle, and HQ really is the center, the mothership. And so, having worked five years in that environment, I understood, obviously, there are needs that were culturally specific, and just in terms of emerging markets, and in terms of the population we are serving, vary greatly. But we have a tendency, at such a big company still, to have a very American centric lens. And so, what's really tough is actually being able to voice: look, we might not be as big or as close to the sun, however, we've got our own customers or own employees that have just as many needs that actually differ. So, if we're looking at a place like Amazon, where we try to scale and automate that we get the best for as many people as possible, with 1+ million people working for the company. There's also a really important element of considering the cultural differences, and the regional differences, and the perspectives. And that's actually an interesting position for me, in particular, because my role is country specific. And even within the EU, the work I'm doing needs to be regional, needs to be UK specific, because of the resources that are available only in London are only in Edinburgh. And so, even trying to scale what I'm doing in support, EU is tough, and then pitching it back to Global and saying, look, we're doing what we know is right for our customers, they question if it will put anything at risk. Because there's always the consideration of it going bigger and wider, because we want to have an equal employee experience. And so, if somebody in Seattle hears an initiative that they're very interested in, you know, is happening across Europe, it doesn't create that standard experience. And so, there's this interesting tension of where can we run with what we know needs to happen regionally and what do we need to go through in terms of some of the approvals and visibility with really big leaders in NA, and in Seattle, that might not have the same perspective?

Stacie Berdan:

That's a great... Wow, what a challenge, what a real challenge.

Jessica Forman:

It is. And it's honestly really good. And I would emphasize this to anybody interested in working abroad – it's really good to be on the other side. Because for so long, I was a part of the mothership, had sort of... didn't totally take the time to make the space and learn what needed to happen that was more customized just because we're, we're so fast paced, and we're so big and we're trying to scale and we're working with Lean teams... But somebody's experience in London or in Italy or in Germany or in Singapore isn't any less important than somebody whose experience is in Seattle or Nashville or Chicago?

Stacie Berdan:

Excellent, excellent point. And well said – that is one of the benefits of working abroad. Most definitely. Yeah. What other advice or tips do you have for listeners thinking about moving to and working in London specifically, or the UK?

Jessica Forman:

I heard you say, I know I had mentioned it earlier, I just did not expect as much of a cultural change. And so, it was a little sort of, I felt disappointed in myself that I wasn't getting more acclimated and feeling really good. And there's just, if you talk to any expat, a natural rollercoaster that you ride with ups and downs in terms of trying to integrate into a new culture, regardless of if they're speaking the same language or not. And so, I think I would just – and it sort of aligns with my role, and maybe I've drank the Kool Aid a little bit too heavily – but it really is about self-care and being okay with being uncomfortable, and knowing that's totally normal and natural, and it does go up and down, and to really lean in the times that are uncomfortable because it's what helps you grow. And I think a big part of acclimating to new culture is, especially in London, not just meeting Brits, but being exposed to so many of the different nationalities and the international community that exists. And so, I, yeah, I would just say not to feel



bad about maybe not acclimating as quickly as you might have expected, and that the British culture is yes, definitely about the Royals and afternoon tea and you know, the properness, but it's also so much about a very large, expansive international community.

Stacie Berdan:

That is wonderful, great. And you're right – culture shock, it happens to every single one of us. And it happens no matter where we go around the world. So thanks for sharing that. It's really, it's touching, it's very touching to hear you talk about it like that, especially as an HR leader, right? Can you talk about some of the trends in HR, in the UK, Europe, other parts of the world, things that you've seen? What do you see coming?

Jessica Forman:

Funnily enough, I do have this lens that's specific to mental health and well-being and future of work. So call me, maybe... but I do think that there's a lot more focus these days, on how people work, and the employee. With the back end of COVID, hopefully, and kind of coming out of the two years where folks really felt the solitary kind of, you know, overthinking, analyzing, not really having a good sort of feeling about going to a place of work every day that might not have been totally connected to values, led to then the great resignation. And now we're in this period called quiet quitting, where folks are doing their job at the bare minimum, knowing that they're not going to go above and beyond, they're gonna do what their job requires, and what they're paid for, which isn't totally common, especially at big companies like Amazon, or Google or PWC. But it is sort of this reflection on the value of work life balance. And so there's a big trend. And it's also a really interesting time too, Stacie, because there's a recession. So employees are really interested in what the company can do for them, and have kind of gone through these trends of reflection and understanding of how the work connects to their values, and what they do every day makes them happy, which is, which is great. And then companies leaning into that because they need to, they need to retain and recruit talent, to now hiring freezes coming up. And so the quiet quitting element is how to keep people engaged, and how to get the employee to feel connected to the values that they've been wondering about. And I think that leans then into what flexibility we're giving employees. We now learned from the pandemic you don't have to come into an office every single day. And so it's what we can find as a happy medium between what the business needs and what employees need to make a really, I think, healthy work environment, which is really good. Really good to see. It's really interesting with the resource constraints.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, well, well, it is, it is another form of kind of dynamic tension between employer and employee, right?

Jessica Forman:

One thousand percent.

Stacie Berdan:

Wow. Wow. So interesting. What an interesting time to be in HR and your space. Cool. Very cool. And working for a leading company that actually can set the bar high, that others can actually see – yeah, you can do it even when you're this big, you can do it. So...

Jessica Forman:

That's our plan.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah. Good luck... So, obviously, as you've already pointed out, especially there in the UK, living abroad is about much more than working. What do you like to do for fun?



Jessica Forman:

That is one of my favorite topics, because I never have a straight answer, and I change it every time. So it depends on the day. I have a huge love of sports, the club sport in the UK. So if I find myself free, I usually try to go to the gym, or for a long walk (we've got beautiful parks in London), or try to find some pickup volleyball. I also have been really working on reading more. So I've worked to connect expats together in a book club. And I do travel quite a bit. I feel as if I don't know how long I'll stay in the UK, I'm really enjoying it so far, I've not put a time cap on it, but I want to be sure to take advantage of the time I have and explore Italy, crazy enough, to explore Spain, explore all of the amazing countries around us. And funny enough, it's less time in travel to Italy or Spain than it is to get to the countryside in the UK. So, I spend a lot of time and a few more dollars or euros or pounds, now I'd like to admit on that, but in my head, it's all about the experience that's, you know, a full picture, not just the work experience, which has helped me grow tremendously, but personally how I'm growing.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, and why not? Right? Why not? You do spend a lot of time, yeah, you do spend a lot of time there in the UK. That's great. But yeah, you may as well take advantage of that. Especially – I'm a foodie, I'm all about the food – I mean, Spain and Italy – great foods. How about in the UK?

Jessica Forman:

Oh, that's a really great question. Because I would just say the myth of bad food in the UK is slowly depleting. It's, it actually is now considered one of the hubs for new cuisine that's, you know, top of the charts. So I would say the British food, it's, it's okay. They don't love a lot of flavor. So there's a lot of opportunity for blandness. But in theory, it's really good, hearty winter food and – I'm from Chicago – so you're sitting in front of a fireplace with a meat pie – sounds delightful. Sometimes you just have to add a lot of salt. But the city has the best Indian food. And I've been to India. And so I can't say it's better than, but it's pretty on par. And so you can find anything here, which is also really, really great. But I would definitely put the food in London against, maybe not Italy, but maybe some of the food I've had in Spain – I would put them in a battle.

Stacie Berdan:

Right. That's good to hear. And of course, the diversity as you point out, right, that's great.

Jessica Forman:

The best part...

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, yeah. So tell me, um, is there is there a piece of advice that you were given somewhere along the way in your career and you didn't take it?

Jessica Forman:

So, I think what I immediately consider is the piece of advice I got regarding moving abroad. There's lots of pieces of advice along the way that I'm sure I didn't take and should've or didn't take and it was a good decision... But knowing this is about an international experience and the folks listening are invested in that, what pops out to me is the piece of advice I got from a colleague around taking the opportunity to move abroad and I was told that – it was somebody, it is still somebody I'm very close to, very highly respect – but she said, you know, don't go unless you get an assignment. It's not worth the pay cut, it's not worth the challenge, you might not get promoted because it's not as close to – I said this reference a bit earlier – it's not as close to the sun, meaning you're not as close to the CEO and CHRO and potential opportunities that might help progress my career. But I came anyway. And I did a direct hire. So I have a contract from the UK, I did take a pay cut (I had a really amazing Manager go to bat for me



so it wasn't as significant as it could have been), but it's a challenge earning on the pound now with the recession and the declining value, but it's worth it. And so I didn't go for a few years, because I've that thought, I'll find an assignment, that's the only time I'll go, the only reason I'll take the chance to be in this kind of a risky situation, because it at least gives me the comfort of knowing I'll be repatriated, and it gives me a time box around the two years or one year that they would put me on assignment. But now I don't have to worry about that. I did worry about the money, which is a different conversation. But it's just like anybody else in this time of life, you know, or any point in life, it's about figuring out how to be responsible, but also doing what is going to be priceless, and your life memories and... I read an article, I think this morning (it's been a long day), that said you spend I think it was 17 or maybe even less percent of your time in life working... And so, if I had gone with that advice of not going until I found an assignment, because it would be potentially damaging to opportunities for promotion, or concerning around my salary, and if that would be something I could use to benchmark future roles – I wouldn't be doing the things I'm doing today, which really expand me in so many other ways outside of that. And so I'm glad I didn't take the advice.

Stacie Berdan:

Absolutely! So what a wonderful story, thank you for sharing that, you're so courageous and brave. And, and I believe 100%, I'm, I'm behind you, I agree with you, the amount that you're learning the way it's expanding your person, pumping out different facets of your personality that you would never have met had you stayed so... good for you. That's great. And I think it's inspiring, and hopefully motivating to our listeners to do the same. You know, take life by the reins yourself and do what it is that you want to do. That's great.

Jessica Forman:

And not wait for that opportunity. I think if I would have waited, and now knowing where we are and place in time with the company, it wouldn't have ever... we're not sending people on assignment. It's only those that are highly, highly skilled and in a specific area, or are very big leaders that need to be sort of expanding and building businesses abroad. And so I don't know if I ever would have gone if I kept waiting for that. So yeah, a great take, take the bull by its horns and do what you think is right for yourself.

Stacie Berdan:

Yes, excellent piece of advice. And that is one of the trends that actually we're seeing in people companies are spending less, so good for you. Excellent. So, moving abroad, same company, local hire... Good, good tip. We have come to the end. And I wanted to ask – this has been a wonderful conversation – is there anything else that you'd like to add for our listeners?

Jessica Forman:

You know, I think the biggest learning for me and just taking a chance is that it's never a one-way street or a one-way door. If there's a concern or an issue, you always can move back. And so I just want to encourage anybody who's thinking about it in the slightest to go for it, because it's, it's something that you can always return from. So my biggest I think takeaway is I wish I did this earlier. Because I feel lucky that I don't have to be in a time box around one or two years of assignment, I really can do what I please in terms – of course, I have a visa and it says five years and I have to ensure that I apply for residency once that five years comes – which is actually super exciting. But I don't have a timeframe right now. I'm just living moment by moment in terms of what is right for me, which I think I've realized through COVID like so many other people, is really important. I kept sort of looking at what's next, what is the best, what is what I should be doing. And being here, especially as I'd mentioned earlier with this culture of valuing work-life balance and valuing holiday and family and time to yourself, has made me realize that I've been missing that a bit. So I would just say take the leap.



Stacie Berdan:

Excellent advice. Thank you so much. It's so exciting, thrilling to hear, hear your perspective, and I'm sure, I'm sure you will touch and inspire many of our listeners. So Thanks, Jess. I really appreciate the time you took and really enjoyed our conversation.

Jessica Forman:

An honor to be with you. 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!