



Season 4, Episode 5 – Working Abroad in Argentina & Colombia

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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'll be traveling a bit through Latin America with Guido Gaona, CEO of BCW Mexico and a corporate communications director with over 25 years of experience working for some of the largest multinationals like SAP, Microsoft and Coca Cola. Guido left his native Mexico for ten years, to work as an expat and CEO in the BCW offices in Buenos Aires and Bogota and in Miami, where he served in a regional coordination role. Guido has robust experience in the corporate communications field at both the agency and the client side. In addition to his native Spanish, he speaks English and a little Italian. Welcome, Guido, it is wonderful to have you with us today.

Guido Gaona:

Thank you so much. It is really a pleasure to be here and having this conversation with you and your audience.

Stacie Berdan:

Great. So let's dive in. One of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there more than just titles tell us what it is that you do?

Guido Gaona:

Well, again, thank you for the opportunity. I currently lead BCW operations in Mexico, and for those of you who don't know what BCW is, it is part of the largest groups of communications agency WPP. And we're mainly focused on corporate communications. So, here at BCW, I am in charge of the business development of the firm in the country, which involves around seven different practices specialized in specific industries or services such as digital communications, influencers engagement, creative content, and some others. Crisis Management is one of our most important services. And also, aside of the work I do at BCW, I'm also a professor of Communications degree at Monterrey Institute of Technology, here in Mexico City.

Stacie Berdan:

Oh, that's great. So wonderful, professional, as well as giving back to students to helping them learn the craft. That's great. So, you have had a stellar career so far, so far - still got a lot ahead of you, I am sure - and so much of it working throughout Latin America, can you share some of the highlights with us?



Guido Gaona:

Sure, thank you so much for your kind words, Stacie. I think that the most important achievement I had during those years that was to keep the business in Argentina up and running under extremely challenging conditions. Because, by the way, if you're planning to move to Argentina, you must be prepared not only to see some of the most spectacular soccer teams in the world, Boca and River, and while having a delicious wine from Mendoza, but you also need to deal with one of the highest inflation rates in the world. This is something one needs to consider before moving to other countries – this and the weather. When I moved to Bogota, I never expected such cold weather. And that's because of the altitude of the city compared to other cities in Colombia. And you would never expect that cold in a country in Latin America, but it happens. So, those are some of the key learnings I started to learn early in my international career.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. So, the fun of soccer and sports and wine and absolutely different neat experiences... But yeah, inflation and the economy. That's a really good point. Anywhere we go around the world, and just because it's so great now in one particular country, doesn't mean things aren't going to change in a couple years. Yeah, so doing the research, being prepared. Great, great tip. So, you're in Mexico City now and you're Mexican. And so, you've worked throughout the country. But you've also worked in Miami, Buenos Aires, Bogota – tell us what it's like to work in each of those – one at a time, kind of like some highlights, some differences, and even compare and contrast if you want.

Guido Gaona:

Sure. When we think in Latin America, I think we usually see it as a single region. But the truth is that the only thing that we all share in common, as I was saying, is the love for soccer. Everything else is completely different. For example, Argentinians tend to be a little more informal in the way they dress and behave, even in corporate environments. While, for example, Colombians are much more formal. When I was there, in Colombia, before the pandemic, you still needed to wear a tie and a suit if you went to a business meeting. And also everybody in Colombia calls you Sir or Madame. So, they're really, really formal. And this is a very important difference from country to country. This is because of the different historic and cultural backgrounds they have. And another relevant nuance in language. For example, in Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, we all speak Spanish, but with completely different accents. So you can probably think we speak different languages. But the same happened to me when I hear the British accent compared to the American accent. And also, an example – when I worked in Miami, I barely spoke English with a Latin accent. But the Latinos living there that are born in Miami, speak English with a much better accent than me. And sometimes when you make an effort to speak in a different language than your native language, everybody thinks that you understand every single conversation. And the truth is that you're constantly, permanently struggling to keep up with conversations, and simultaneously translating in your mind. So, this is a challenge for all of us.

Stacie Berdan:

That's really interesting point because so many of us... I do not speak Spanish, but would think, well, Latin America – Spanish... but you're saying that every single country obviously is different. Different nuances, different approaches to business, is there... So, from the formal to the informal – are there some stories that you can share with us maybe, that will kind of bring the business etiquette or even just the business experiences to life for our listeners?

Guido Gaona:

Yeah, just a very simple experience. When I was in Buenos Aires, I was coming from Mexico and from Colombia, which are much more formal when doing these business meetings. So, when I was in Buenos Aires, once we went to a meeting with a client, I was dressed in a suit and wearing a tie. And the rest of my team arrived to the meeting wearing, you know, like, T-shirts, you know, like this shirts with short sleeves. So, I was completely surprised that



they showed up to the meeting like that. And I talked to them – hey, guys, you know, we're going to meet a client here, so we need to be a little bit more formal. But the surprise was for me, because when we entered the meeting room, the client was expecting us also in a t-shirt. So again, and this is a really important point, sometimes, you see things different because of your own culture and your own perspective. And all the things that I mentioned in here are according to my own perspective, as a Mexican, and you need, of course, to take that into consideration.

Stacie Berdan:

Very important point. Yeah, we see things through our own lenses, as you point out. That's a great tip, because everybody sees it through their own as well. So, I'm gonna dive into something fun for me. I love food. I love to talk about food. It's one of my favorite topics. A little bit fun here. What's it like throughout the region? Do you have favorite dishes in different places?

Guido Gaona:

Definitely. I think that if you go to Argentina, you need to try the meat in Argentina. It is famous for the meat and also for the wine. And as I was saying, the Mendoza wine is wonderful. I think it's one of the best wines in the world. And if you go to Colombia, and I know that this is a permanent fight between Colombia and Venezuela, who were the creators of arepas – which is a food made of corn, very delicious. But when you're in Bogota or Venezuela, you need to try arepas. Definitely. And of course, when you come to Mexico, I know that everyone thinks that we love tacos, and we actually love tacos, but there are a lot of other food and beverages that you can have here. Not only tequila, for instance, but also mezcal. The mezcal is very famous at this moment in Mexico. We're exporting that and you should try that when you come to Mexico.

Stacie Berdan:

Great point, but how about Miami? My hometown? That's actually where I spent a lot of time growing up. Do you think about Miami? Is it truly a cultural mixture of all the different Latin American spots for food?

Guido Gaona:

I can share my experience. When I was living there just because I tried to find some good tacos, of course, in Miami... But the truth is that you can find food that is adapted not only to the local preferences of the consumers, but also depending on the ingredients that you can find. I know that nowadays you can find even most of the ingredients that you use to prepare a specific food. But sometimes there are specific spices or minor details that really make a food taste like when you are in the actual country. So yeah, you can see a mix between the people that have been living there for many years and come from ancestors that were from Latin America or from Spain, but they have adapted many of their customs to their current reality.

Stacie Berdan:

Mm hmm. Similar experience for me, when I left DC and moved to Hong Kong, I thought I knew what Chinese food was. And I did not. It was very different, and fantastic, and regional. Yeah, that's great. So back to the working bit, a little bit. What are some of the hottest industries or maybe types of jobs that are on the rise that maybe an American graduate might be interested in – in Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, across Latin America? What are you seeing?

Guido Gaona:

What we have been seeing, and I think...I don't know if this will continue to be like this, because of the, as you can see the economic and political scenarios that we're foreseeing for the world and in Latin America for the upcoming year... But what we have seen is that industries such as technology – which includes different niches, such as gaming, or fintech – also foreign commerce and energy in Latin America are very, very strong. And they will continue to be the drivers of growth in the region – in the particular case of Mexico. I think that due to its geographic proximity to



the US, all careers related to these industries will continue to bloom, because of the nearshoring services that many companies are providing here to the US companies. In case of Colombia, I think Colombia's economy is somehow similar to the Mexican one, despite that it is a smaller economy. But its workforce is highly qualified. So, they really appreciate foreign talent in Colombia, and many of the most brilliant professionals I have met in my professional career are Colombians. And in the case of Argentina, I think there are two or three sectors that will continue to grow despite these conditions. I think energy, mining, and agriculture are permanently leading the growth in the country, which is constantly living with high inflation rates and significant devaluation. So, I think those are some of the industries or sectors that will continue to have some growth in the next years.

Stacie Berdan:

That's good to know, you clarified all of that wonderfully, so thanks for that. So after ten years, you worked throughout these other places, and you went back, you returned to Mexico. What was that like?

Guido Gaona:

I think this is a great question. Because I can be completely transparent and honest with you, it was a nightmare. I think returning to my home country has been one of the most difficult things I have done. And I think this is because you get so used to living abroad, and constantly learning new things, that returning to your country, sometimes you can feel like you're giving a step back, you know, in your professional career, and also in your personal life. I think that the truth is that you never return the same way you left your country, you're totally a different person, because the international experience has changed you a lot. And, also, being able to see your family and friends once again is a gift. So finally, I have discovered that this is not a step back. I think it is just another phase of your career and life, and you will find new challenges and situations that will make you learn something different. But at the beginning, it could be a real challenge, especially in Latin America, for instance. And just an example, when I returned to Mexico City, I was not used to the traffic jams that you can see here in Mexico City. It is a nightmare. But then – you get used to it – and you find something different and all the beautiful parts of the country, so you're happy at the end.

Stacie Berdan:

So that's a really good tip for our listeners. It's not always just fabulous, right? You go, you have a good time, there are challenges. And then once, if and when, you eventually go back to your home country, be prepared for that cultural shock yet again that you need to adapt to? Yeah, that's a really good point. So for our listeners, what advice or specific tips do you have for them, if they're interested in working in Latin America, specifically the markets you've been in?

Guido Gaona:

I think that, you know, as I was mentioning, I really struggled with economic conditions in Argentina. So my first advice would be to try to understand not only cultural differences, or focusing only on what a tourist could try to find out about a country. Because if you do that, you're gonna stay only in a very shallow part of the research you need to do before moving to a country. Keep in mind that you are going to live there for a significant period of time. So you need to consider economic conditions and do some forecasts of your own financial plans to see how it could affect your salary and benefits with time. I think that's the first advice I would give. Another advice I think that you need, especially living in Latin America, in any of these cities – in Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo in Brazil, Santiago in Chile or Mexico City – try to find a place close to your workplace, because at the beginning, you will not know the city and sometimes commuting can really be a headache. If you don't know the city and the time it takes to go from one place to another. Once you know the city a little bit better than you can move from your apartment or from the place you're living in. And maybe, my last advice, I think that sometimes you will be homesick from time to time. This is completely normal, and that feeling will start to vanish eventually. But maybe during your first year living abroad, keep in mind that perhaps you would like to return on vacations to visit your family and friends, and this will take time from your vacations and part of your budget living there. So you need to plan ahead, just in case you get homesick and you want to return to see your friends and family.



Stacie Berdan:

Wonderful, practical advice. Thank you so much for that. Great. So what are some of the biggest...those are great tips... so what are some of the biggest benefits or challenges/downsides to working internationally, you pick.

Guido Gaona:

I pick the benefits because I have learned so much from this. I think learning from people with a different culture is the biggest benefit you will ever have. Since it will completely blow your mind in a good way. I think you will learn new perspectives and how to address a situation that you could have managed completely differently. And you will now manage it from a different approach and point of view. And that's an experience that you can only live when you have conversations and learn from other people, because it will make you much more creative and flexible. And you will be able to work almost with all kinds of personalities and capabilities. I think it is not only a work experience, but an emotional one. So this for me is or has been the biggest benefit I have had with this international career.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful, wonderful advice. So let's go... let's step back, maybe 10,000 feet, what do you see... you're a business leader, and you've worked in Latin America and have clients all over... what do you see on the horizon for those entering the workforce in the next year or two? What do they need to be aware of, to prepare for?

Guido Gaona:

Well, I think that after the pandemic, because we started to see this during the last months of the pandemic... I know that it hasn't been over... but we're, I think, we're in the last phase of the pandemic, I think it has been demonstrated that the workforce is completely mobile. And you could be working for a company based in the UK while you're sitting in Bogota or Canada. So, I believe that many companies will start to hire talent no matter what part of the world it is living in, to have a remote job. So I think this will represent some challenges in terms of benefits for the employers, but for the employees, the possibility to be geographically relocated could be reduced, at least at the beginning. Perhaps relocation will be possible after a trial period when the company has already put your capabilities and talents to the test. So, you need to be prepared to do the job from your current location for a company in a different geography, at least, again, at the beginning, because it also is related to costs, and companies are trying to be very careful with costs. When thinking about talent, they want to invest in the best talent available, but also they need to keep in mind their costs. So, I think we're going to see more of this coming in the upcoming years.

Stacie Berdan:

That's a very interesting point, and even if someone is not relocated, right, they are actually a mobile workforce working for a company, say, in another country on another continent halfway around the world, they still need to be globally aware, right, they still need to understand how to work cross-culturally, because they could be working with colleagues around the world as well. Right?

Guido Gaona:

Absolutely. And I think that we have many, many tools and resources to start understanding the local, you know, the local context and the local flavors. Talking about business, you know, social networks give us a lot of different perspectives and possibilities to engage with consumers. So, nowadays, technology allows us to do this in such different ways.

Stacie Berdan:

You are so thoughtful. Guido, this is such a wonderful conversation. I'm wondering, is there a piece of advice that you'd like to go back and give your younger self?



Guido Gaona:

Yes, definitely. If I was younger, I would probably make some decisions in a different way. I think my advice here is do not sacrifice your personal life choices only to give a boost to your international career. In my case, I never had kids, because I thought that moving from country to country would have made it really difficult for them to adapt to a new culture every two or three years, because I was moving from Colombia to Miami after three years, and then after three years from Miami to Buenos Aires. So I thought it was going to be very difficult for my kids. So the truth is, you can't forget that your professional career is only one of many other aspects of your life. And well, having international professional experience is amazing. You should always have your personal life and goals at sight, and of course, as a priority.

Stacie Berdan:

Thank you, thank you for sharing that story. That's heartfelt, and I feel it and it's a wise advice. It is not all about our careers for sure. Yeah. Well, we're about to wrap up. This has been fantastic. I've so enjoyed speaking with you, Guido, I think I could do it all day. But I know you're a very busy man, and you have things to go to. So, is there anything else you'd like to add, a piece of... anything... for our listeners, before we wrap up?

Guido Gaona:

I just want to share a thought that has been with me since I was a teenager. I think the world is too vast and to reach, to spend your whole life living in just one place. I know it might sound like a cliché, but we are not trees. And we can have strong roots in a very special place we call home, but there's so much fun and wonderful experiences and people waiting for us outside our country of origin. And you cannot say you really know a country for only visiting it on your vacations. You only know the people, the culture, and the local flavors when you actually live in them. So I would really encourage all of you to go and get it, you know, to go outside and have this international experience if you can. It will really be a turning point, of course in your career, but also in your personal life and in your whole life. So I just wish you lots of luck on this.

Stacie Berdan:

Yes! And do it, take the deep dive, yes. Thank you so much, Guido. This has been wonderful. I really appreciate your time today.

Guido Gaona:

Thank you, Stacie, and your audience for this opportunity.

[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!