



Book Carry a Chicken in Your Lap Or Whatever It Takes to Globalize Your Business

Bruce Alan Johnson and R. William Ayres
St. Martin's Press, 2009

Recommendation

In *The Music Man*, the 1950s Broadway musical, a chorus of traveling salesmen sings, “You’ve got to know the territory!” in an old-time train car chugging toward Iowa. The drummers’ point is that you’ll never get ahead if you don’t understand the region where you work, its people and its customs. If this is true of rural Iowa, it’s even more true of Bahrain, East Timor or Botswana. Unfortunately, many companies fail to prepare their employees for overseas assignments, or they send people who are completely wrong for the jobs. In this book, international commerce experts Bruce Alan Johnson and R. William Ayres explain what kinds of people are suited for overseas jobs, what kinds are not and the training international employees require. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to executives and managers responsible for overseas assignments and staffing, as well as to anyone who plans to work abroad.

Take-Aways

- For most companies and many nonprofit organizations, establishing a global presence is increasingly important.
- Only certain employees can handle overseas work assignments.
- Some otherwise competent employees should never work overseas.
- Seventy-five percent of foreign job postings for multinationals do not work out.
- Send the right individuals to overseas jobs, and adequately train and prepare them.
- Engage in candid conversations with job candidates on race, religion and gender, and the cultural practices and values of the country in question.
- Employees who work abroad must learn to accept other cultures without trying to change them.
- Don’t send people who have their own agendas to work for you overseas.
- Evaluate the personalities of both the employee and his or her spouse.
- The best way to win over another country’s inhabitants is to try to speak their language. Don’t be shy.

Summary

“I’m Not Wearing That!”

The 25-year-old American woman, a midlevel manager for a U.S. multinational corporation, was excited about her overseas assignment. It would be her first job in another country, and she was proud that her bosses had chosen her. Within minutes, her plane would be landing at the airport of a Middle Eastern country. She couldn’t wait to deplane and get started. Then things turned sour. An airplane crewmember asked her to put on a *chador*, the traditional modesty garment made of black cloth that women wear throughout the Islamic world. “No way!” she yelled. “You’re not getting that damned thing on me.”

“Companies often set themselves up for failure by sending the wrong people to the wrong places with the wrong expectations.”

The crewmember politely explained to the woman that the country’s national law required women to wear *chadors* in public, but she continued to refuse to put it on. “You’ll be arrested, miss, and probably be treated very harshly,” the crewmember said, but she remained firm. When the plane landed, security police entered and roughly grabbed her out of her seat. They pulled her down the airplane ramp, where a member of the religious police, the *muta’awa*, joined them and began to whip her. Her angry screams turned to cries of pain. The police arrested her and put her on the next plane out of the country, very much against her will.

“Few people are qualified to judge agents, reps or partners in foreign lands.”

The young woman could have avoided this terrible experience if her company had trained her in the laws and traditions of her new home and explained what she should expect upon arrival. The company made the poor but typical judgment that any competent executive could handle an overseas assignment.

“Deep in our culture, we believe something that unfortunately turns out to be wrong much of the time: Anybody can do anything, if they just try hard enough.”

Sending the wrong person to represent your firm in a foreign country can prove catastrophic. U.S. firms post thousands of their employees on international assignments each year and spend about \$300,000 per person each year to keep them overseas – yet three out of four such assignments fail. Since the assignments usually last about four years, companies’ total investment in each employee working overseas adds up to about \$1.2 million – 75% of which is money down the drain. Canadian firms do just as badly.

“Carry a Chicken”

The international marketing manager of a British corporation had traveled to a Latin American country to sell a tactical-communication system to the country’s defense department. However, the defense minister had broken numerous appointments with him. The marketing manager, determined to make the sale, decided he would turn up unexpectedly at the minister’s home in the country to close the deal.

“As William James points out, we have to take the world as it is, not how it ought to be or how we would like it to be.”

The only way to get there was on an ancient bus, which was jam-packed with passengers and their luggage, much of it tied to the roof. The ride was long and uncomfortable, and the marketing manager spent most of it with his seatmate’s chicken sitting in his lap. When he finally arrived at the minister’s home, he discovered that the man had already authorized the purchase of the system from his company. During their unplanned meeting, the minister applauded the marketing manager’s tenacity. “*Oye, usted apareció!*” he said. Translation: “Hey, you showed up!”

“Sometimes diversity means that other cultures have very different ways of looking at the world – ways that may disagree with yours.”

The moral of the story is that to do business abroad, you must thoroughly understand and respect the local customs. The marketing manager knew that Latin Americans did not share his expectations regarding time and appointments. He did not blame the minister for failing to meet him. Instead, he came up with an alternative, and took its discomforts with good grace.

Why You Should “Go Global”

Today, more and more companies operate internationally. North American domestic markets are getting smaller each year, so for many firms, confining operations to these markets is suicidal. At the same time, the shrinking value of the U.S. dollar makes goods and services produced in the United States extremely price-competitive with goods and services from other countries. Nonprofit organizations are also looking abroad for endowments and to form partnerships.

“Not only is it ill-advised to send someone from your company who is likely to meet resistance and discrimination, but you should also be careful to avoid sending your own employees if they are racists.”

As employment opportunities grow scarce in North America, job applicants consider “globalizing their careers.” However, businesses, nonprofits and individuals should not “go global” without preparation.

Globalization Does Have Pitfalls

Not everyone is capable temperamentally, professionally or otherwise to handle an overseas work assignment. Choose the right individuals for such postings or you’re asking for trouble.

“Fear of learning a language ranks up there with fear of math for most of us.”

Many North Americans do not have a clue about foreign markets, histories and cultures. They make the kinds of errors the international marketing director for a *Fortune* 1000 company did when he assigned a saleswoman who grew up in Warsaw to open up the Russian market for his organization. Resentments between Poles and Russians stretch back hundreds of years. Traditionalist Russian businessmen resent working with women. Sending a woman to handle business affairs in Dubai or a black person to do the same in South Africa may cause trouble.

“Business really isn’t a blind date – you’ve got to know whom you’re working with.”

Sexist? Yes. Racist? Yes. But when you’re dealing with international operations, such issues are beside the point. If you plan to play on the other team’s turf, you’ve got to bring the right shoes. North American firms commendably oppose discrimination of all types, but this is not always the case in other parts of the world. Therefore, take into account gender, race, ethnicity, religion and other similar concerns when you consider whom to appoint to overseas jobs.

Keep the Missionaries at Home

Businesses are not out to change the world. They exist to make profits for their investors. Employees whom you post overseas must understand this. They may encounter practices overseas that are not in keeping with their own traditions. If they decide their role is not just to improve your business operations but also to fix the culture, they can quickly ruin your business.

“Americans and American enterprises tend to assume they enjoy special protection simply because of the passport they carry.”

Send employees overseas who can adapt to unfamiliar situations without trying to change them. Evaluate the employees’ spouses as well: They can cause just as much trouble as the employees themselves – sometimes more.

What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate

If an employee and his or her family create problems overseas, the blame will fall on the manager who sent them there. Reserve your overseas assignments for sharp, savvy individuals who learn quickly and are flexible and thoughtful. They should be sensitive to language and communication issues. If possible, they should learn to speak the language of the country where they are going, even if they initially master only a few words or phrases. Nothing endears you more internationally than trying, even feebly, to converse in another’s mother tongue.

“There is a difference between bribery and facilitation; if you don’t understand that distinction, the people you send overseas can land in real trouble.”

However, speaking a new language can also lead to misunderstandings. One Western businessman nearly got himself arrested in a Turkish restaurant because he asked over and over for peaches. The waiter thought he was saying *piç*, which means “bastard” in Turkish, and was understandably insulted.

The Time Challenge

Time differences around the world make working abroad difficult. Jet lag, which upsets individuals’ natural circadian rhythms, can be debilitating for some people. Don’t assign an employee who has a hard time with jet lag to attend a meeting right after he or she debarks from a plane. Send people who can easily adjust their daily schedules and “think across time zones.” Many cultures have different customs concerning time from Westerners. For example, Saudi Arabians like to eat dinner at midnight to avoid the baking heat. Plan to adhere to their schedules, don’t make them adjust to yours. The organization back home needs to be sensitive to time differences as well. The time may be 4:00 P.M. where you are and 1:00 A.M. where your employee is. Call at times that are convenient for both of you.

Finding and Training the Right People

Use the human resources department to help you find the right people for overseas assignments. HR professionals know how to determine who will be a good fit. The ideal candidate is able to work well with people from different cultures, is accepting and tolerant, and is able to learn a foreign language.

“Employees – and their spouses – must stay out of the host country’s affairs.”

However, even the best job candidate will not do well in an overseas assignment if he or she goes into it cold. Explain what the posting entails, what the company’s goals are for the job and what the major challenges may be. Provide specific information about cultural differences, and discuss hot-button issues such as “gender, race and religion.” Listen carefully to how candidates respond to these topics. Find out what makes them tick. Learn as much about them as possible before you make your decision.

What Not to Do

Avoid these common mistakes:

- Don’t assign foreign job postings to the first person who applies (surprisingly, many companies do this).
- Don’t insist that employees who wish to move up in the ranks have international work experience. This creates foreign-office postings where people just go through the motions for a few years because they want a promotion.
- Don’t assume that because an employee did well in a domestic assignment he or she will ace a foreign office job.
- Never place people in international jobs as a punishment. This inevitably backfires.

If You’re Applying for an International Position

Before you apply for an overseas position, make sure that it will work well for you personally. Assess yourself honestly. Do you possess the right psychological make-up? Do you work well with people who are different from you? Will different office environments and organizational cultures get under your skin? Examine your motivations. Do they include helping foreigners to fix their inefficient, silly or misogynistic practices? If so, do yourself and your company a favor and stay home.

What to Do Once You’re There

How you organize affairs at your international outpost will make all the difference regarding what you’ll achieve. Establishing good relationships with local firms is crucial, but finding the right partners can be tricky. Indeed, many veteran international experts believe that choosing overseas partners is the “thorniest and most complex element of international business.” If you are new to the assignment or the country, request help from headquarters. Talk to other firms from your country that have local offices. Do your due diligence before establishing a relationship – not so much about document checks, which people can easily fake, but rather about the personalities involved.

Learn about the local political scene. Interactions between business and politics can be complex and difficult to understand. Don’t assume that the rules that apply in your home country apply elsewhere. As a foreign business person, expect to be a political player.

Don’t assume that the locals accept corruption. Many foreigners believe that Americans are exceedingly corrupt. To avoid the problem, work with international firms that you trust. Yet, don’t make locals feel that you automatically mistrust them. If you represent a U.S. company, adhere to the standards of the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), which forbids paying bribes but allows “facilitation.” To understand the fine line between the two, listen to the late Peter Drucker, who advised

people to ask themselves if they'd feel comfortable telling their spouses or parents about their actions. The best way to avoid dealing with corruption, of course, is not to do business in countries where it is the rule.

About the Authors

Bruce Alan Johnson's company helps business clients tap international markets, earning them more than \$330 million in financial engineering and countertrade programs. **R. William Ayres** is an academic whose discipline is international relations.
