

Whether you are backpacking around the world, visiting relatives in a far-off land, or touring a single country with a work visa (the BUNAC or SWAP programs offer work and travel visas), consider gaining professional experience while abroad. Traditionally, travellers find work in seasonal or retail industries while abroad to fund their trip. Finding these jobs is fairly easy; hours are flexible, and you have time to travel. But you could also use part of your time abroad to gain career-building experience. Imagine spending the first six months of your one-year trip working or volunteering in your field of study, saving the last part of your trip for travel and fun. Consider career objectives before you leave – you could build experience *and* have a blast!

## Think About Your Career Pre-departure

Finding a career-building position abroad is feasible, but it takes more effort than finding low-skilled work. Begin your job hunting strategy before leaving home and you will jumpstart the process.

- **Make the decision to go professional:** Set your goal now and work towards it. Be flexible when you arrive and be prepared to accept low-skilled work while you continue to look for professional work.
- **Focus on finding professional experience, not a job:** Your chances of finding short-term employment in a professional capacity are exponentially greater if employers know up front that you are looking for short-term entry-level professional work and that you are willing to work for low wages in exchange for professional experience. Say this at the top of your resume and when contacting employers. You can even use the term “internship” if the term is familiar in your host country.
- **Professional experience abroad has great career value:** Any type of work while abroad is considered international work experience, and this looks good on any resume. The assignment can be as short as two weeks and can still have great career value. In terms of resume impact, if your experience was in your professional field, your resume will speak volumes about the kind of candidate you are.
- **Offer to work for low wages—experience is what counts:** Say yes to a job which gives you professional experience over a job that pays more. Let employers know that you are willing to work for low wages, a small stipend, or in exchange for room and board if circumstances permit. A part-time job in the evening can subsidize a low-wage professional job. Remember, professional experience now will pay off exponentially later in your career.
- **Focus on finding professional work during the first phase of your time abroad:** Professional work and holiday time do not usually mix well. Use the energy you have when you first arrive to look for professional work. It is difficult to shift into professional mode and land a professional position in the latter stages of your time abroad. Save the fun and travel for the second half of your time abroad.
- **What does it take? Something extraordinary:** There is no doubt that you need to show entrepreneurship when looking for professional work. You will need to impress a local employer to take a chance on hiring you. Organization, persistence, and being fearless when networking are key. These are the characteristics that employers expect you to have when you work for them, so do something equivalent while you search for jobs. Do small extraordinary things well and you will succeed.

## Pre-departure Details

- **Business clothing:** Have professional attire with you. You may not have much room for extra baggage but you need to pack two dress shirts, dress pants or a business dress, a business jacket and dress shoes. If you land a position, purchase additional clothing from the local second-hand shops to save funds.
- **Your job-search portfolio:** You can sell yourself quickly to employers if you bring a portfolio of your work. Traditionally, this strategy is best-suited to those in the creative industries, but increasingly others are creating “portfolio” web sites to sell their wares. Include samples of your past work (including essays).
- **Resume materials:** Have copies of your resume printed on quality stock before leaving. Keep resumes in a folder to protect them from being crumpled.

Purchase a document holder to look professional when meeting potential employers. You should also have your portfolio files on a portable drive.

- **Reference letters before you go:** In a traditional job search you write “References available upon request” on the resume. In a job search abroad, you must impress employers immediately, so they can make fast hiring decisions. Assemble reference letters before you go and include them with your resume. Coach references about the type of jobs you will be applying for so that they can address those objectives.
- **Local mobile phone:** Consider acquiring a local mobile phone when you arrive. It will facilitate all aspects of the job search and, better still, you can stay in touch with friends and family.
- **Business cards:** Consider creating business cards to give potential employers. Include your name, e-mail (professional address), web site (if professional), cell phone (if local), career objective (i.e. internship or short-term contract work “in the field of ...”), indicate if you have a work visa, and include a short mention of your expertise and/or key qualities. No need to include a local address, since it will probably change.

## Pre-departure Job Search Essentials

Start looking for work before you go. Spend three or four full days doing this before your departure. Ideally, start two months before you leave, but it is not too late to start two weeks before your departure.

- **The pre-departure job search strategy:** E-mail employers saying that you will be arriving in your host country soon and that you would like to set up an interview for a work placement / internship. Consider phoning employers while still at home; they will take note of a long-distance call. Upon arrival, call employers and ask for an information interview even if they have not replied to your original email or replied negatively. Use charm and professional determination to get your foot in the door.
- **Prepare a two-paragraph professional description of yourself:** This is more important than you might think. Use it when cold-calling employers. Aside from your skills, tell employers that you are willing to work for low wages in exchange for professional experience.
- **Prepare a resume and cover letter:** Target your field of expertise and mention the key points from the career objective section above.
- **Target one industry in the city of your choosing:** Research twenty-five companies in your industry that have an office in your destination city. Find employers using Google and the Yellow Pages online. Extend your list by researching local industry associations. Build document with one employer per page, including the organization name, contact name, title and address, and a description of the organization. After you have a sense of who the industry players are, begin making contact.
- **Be forward when networking and contacting employers:** The charm of a bright, enthusiastic, articulate, and prepared international job seeker will go a long way to impress employers. The job search is a series of rejections, followed by one offer. Stay committed.
- **What type of professional jobs should I target?** The choice is easy for an engineer or graphic artist. For others, choosing a target might seem difficult. The key to choosing the correct job search target is to understand your skill sets. What are the dominant features of your professional personality? An outgoing person should work in sales, or public relations. A shy but process-oriented person should work in systems. The job search will be easier if you target, but remain open to alternatives when they arise.

## A Last Word

Don't miss out on the experience and career punch of holding a professional position abroad. Go forward. Use your entrepreneurial zeal. Make the sacrifices necessary to secure these positions, and reap the rewards. Good luck!

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