

Making the Transition Back to Local Work After an Overseas Job

As seen in the Wall Street Journal By JOANN S. LUBLIN

You can go home again -- with difficulty.

As the sour economy and Iraq war persist, many American expatriates find themselves headed home after losing or quitting their foreign posts. But it's hard to regain your footing in the U.S. when you haven't worked here for years. You lack current contacts and, undoubtedly, your job-hunting skills are rusty.

"I thought I would have no problem landing another job right away," recalls Sean McManus, a 45-year-old former vice president of Quest International, a Dutch food and fragrance maker. He resigned and returned to the U.S. for family reasons in October following 3½ years at corporate headquarters in Amsterdam. Plenty of repatriated Americans "run into brick walls," he adds. "Headhunters don't call them back."

Preparation, perseverance and patience can overcome such barriers. That combination ultimately worked for Mr. McManus. Among other things, he convinced Quest to pay for 15 months of outplacement counseling -- and to launch the unusually lengthy assistance three months before he left Amsterdam. His search ended last month when he was hired as North American human-resources chief for Symrise, a German food and fragrance producer.

Departing Gillette executive Jean Larkin was too busy preparing her London successor last summer to request outplacement aid before she moved back to her Redding, Conn., home. "Getting my resume completed sooner would have accelerated things," the 44-year-old human-resources official admits. She left the shaving-products maker primarily because she wasn't interested in a third consecutive international stint.

While stationed abroad, Ms. Larkin had some contact with American colleagues from past jobs -- especially after they read about her expatriate experiences in my [July 2001 column](#). Generally, however, "her U.S. network was fairly cold and not as extensive as she would have liked it to be," says Paul Stuhlman, her outplacement counselor at Manchester, an executive career-development firm in Boston.

When Ms. Larkin began her U.S. job hunt in the fall, she realized she needed "to cast the net as wide as possible." The executive prepared business cards with a two-sentence description of her best credentials. She handed them out to her old neighbors and new banker in Connecticut. She joined local networking groups for human-resources executives and a professional organization for female managers.

European executive recruiters for major U.S. search firms, whom Ms. Larkin had used to fill Gillette spots overseas, arranged introductions with their American counterparts.

Last month, Cisco Systems, a producer of Internet switching equipment, hired Ms. Larkin as human-resources director of its enterprise-systems division in New York. She landed the job through one of

Mr. Stuhlman's former outplacement clients, who recommended her to a friend who happened to be Cisco's outside recruiter.

Career specialists and returned expats propose several other ways that repatriated Americans might ease their re-employment search. First, inform colleagues about your ideal locales, industries and positions. Stay flexible about where you'll live next. Mr. McManus leased a furnished home in Fairfield, Conn. His new Symrise job, which began Monday, is in Teterboro, N.J.

Search on a global basis even if you prefer to work in the U.S., suggests Gregory J. McDonald, a 52-year-old former expatriate living in Greenwich, Conn. He explored U.S., European and Latin American opportunities from London after a late 1999 takeover cost him the European presidency of Reckitt & Colman, a British maker of household and food products.

Mr. McDonald, who had worked abroad since 1976, became a marketing vice president for Texaco in White Plains, N.Y. He left Texaco following its fall 2001 acquisition by Chevron. He then took time off to be with his family.

Since resuming his job hunt in October, Mr. McDonald again has sought positions here and abroad that value his global expertise. But certain U.S. businesses won't consider his candidacy because they believe he doesn't know the domestic market very well. And most European concerns "are really battering down the hatches," he says.

It's tempting, though unwise, for returning expatriates to play down their international background just because they now prefer to stay in the U.S. A smarter approach: Frame your experience in terms that will strongly appeal to American companies.

Accentuate your adaptability. That may mean touting your successful introduction of a new product in a nation where "you had to go in from scratch, not knowing the culture and maybe not knowing the language," says Laura Hill, managing director of client services for Crenshaw Associates. The New York outplacement firm is assisting Mr. McDonald.

"Sometimes the argument works and sometimes it doesn't," Ms. Hill concedes. "In this job market, very little is working for people in any industry category."