

Do as the Romans

Do

By Julie Ackerman Kaeli

The idea of working abroad can be exciting but also a bit overwhelming. Depending on the country, language and cultural differences could prove to be a challenge. “Linguistic issues are half the problem,” says Maria Guida, a NYWICI member who has delivered communication skills training programs to Fortune 100 companies in the New York area through her company, Successful Speaker, Inc. “If you are hosted by an American company, they tend to provide training or translators to address the language barrier.” However, for those who do not have a corporation’s support, it is important to learn as much of the native language as possible. “You will encounter people in major international cities who speak English, so that also helps,” she adds.

The other problem is overcoming the cultural barriers, and Guida strongly recommends that those considering or preparing to work abroad “do as the Romans do. You need to understand the culture, especially the business etiquette... Do you shake hands or bow? How are meetings conducted? Do you use titles, or is it informal?”

Linda Stephen, a former NYWICI member who hosted a 2003 NYWICI roundtable discussion on working abroad, also stresses the importance of learning the culture and suggests teaching English in the foreign country. “This is a great way to ease into the culture, learn the language, and make connections.” Stephen has more than 12 years of communications experience in Japan and New York, advising multinational corporations and United Nations agencies. She is fluent in Japanese and previously lived and worked in rural Japan.

Stephen also recommends using the local economic development office to locate and research international companies for potential job opportunities. “Every state or major city has an economic development office that should list the foreign corporations by country,” she says.

Rachel Barlow currently works for The Kellen Company as Vice President in their Brussels office. Kellen is a global professional services company, and NYWICI happens to be one of their clients. Barlow was raised in a British family in Brussels and Paris and has some advice for those interested in working abroad. “Tying up with an American person already working in the place would be helpful,” she says. In addition to this, she expresses the need to keep an open mind. “Everyone is different, and you can learn something from everyone you meet, which only makes your world richer.”

RESOURCES

Recommended reading from Maria Guida:

Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in 60 Countries by Morrison, Conaway, and Borden

English as a Second Language, www.tesol.org

Association of International Educators (NAFSA), www.nafsa.org

New York City Economic Development Corporation, www.nycedc.com/Web