

Four lessons from working abroad

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Online Desk: It baffles me how little of the world I have seen.

I started my professional career with an aspiration to work for a global business that would enable me to have a borderless career. Last year, I had the chance to live and work in South Korea for three months on an assignment and here are four lessons I learned during my time.

People trump all else

Everything begins by trying to understand the people that constitute the place. While learning what makes, ticks and drives them, you learn that your own priorities are personal to you, may not always resonate with others, and it will be foolish to impose them mindlessly. In the end, the key to be accepted is to accept differences first.

I personally felt the most appreciated by my colleagues when I immersed myself in their lifestyle, enjoyed their foods and traditions, and conversed about their history. It is crucial to apprise yourself on the culture of the place you are living in, learn basic words and phrases from their language, and always be open to learning new ways of work every day. Most importantly, it is crucial to extend others the same level of empathy you want extended to you.

Balance of independence and interdependence

You are never truly aware of how strong you are until you learn to navigate life alone. In the process of finding food that aligns with your palate and values, using public transport that entails translating every single station stop using apps, and coming home tired from work and cooking for one – you learn to stay resilient under pressure. You also learn that it's okay to be vulnerable and ask for help when you need it.

Life transcends work

Despite being some of the most hardworking and diligent people, South Koreans make it their mission to prioritise personal well-being. A lifetime of eating healthy and being active leads to some of the most thriving elderly population, vividly visible in public transport as 80-year-old people are just as independent and easy-going as the younger generations. My co-workers would maximise their life after work and at the weekends, engaging themselves in activities ranging from golf to hiking to working out or simply relaxing by the Han River with loved ones around a Korean BBQ.

Normality deserves equal appreciation

Despite having the most exciting time when no two days are the same, I fondly remembered the comforts of familiarity. Being able to understand everything being said around or having loved ones to come home to is a privilege we barely ever acknowledge. If nothing else, living abroad will teach you to be more appreciative of routine and ordinariness. Poetically enough, the most common word I caught and used during my stay in South Korea was “Gamsahamnida”, translating to “Thank You”, and after a very meaningful and fulfilling stay there, I truly did feel thankful for the incredible experience.

My advice to every ambitious young professional would be to actively look for opportunities to live and work abroad. You will learn things about yourself that surprise you, appreciate the little joys of the big world around you, and in the end permanently yearn to know, learn and explore more.