

MARKETING YOUR STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

As college students study abroad in larger numbers and increasingly diverse locations, employers are correlating this experience with employability. As a candidate for a job, it is important to know how to market your overseas experience to your advantage. How should you document your study abroad experience on your resumé or tactfully bring it up in an interview? What aspects of a study abroad experience should you highlight and why? What are the risks of being a study abroad returnee in a competitive job market? Understanding the risks and stereotypes about study abroad and resumé structure, talking about your time abroad in interviews, and discussing the new skill set you acquired can make or break your hire-ability.

Consider this scenario: you've just returned from studying abroad and are graduating in about six months. You have considered all your options and have decided to plunge into the job market. The process of looking for jobs and selling yourself is a reality. You know that your French language skills are better than ever and that you have matured tremendously and gained both self-confidence and independence while overseas. You have also sharpened your cross-cultural communication and decision-making skills, as well as your ability to succeed in ambiguous situations, all the while surviving and learning in a culture different from your own. You know this experience can potentially put you ahead of all the other candidates, but can you sell it?

THE RESUME

Your resumé is the first tangible impression your potential employer has of you, and it can easily be the last. Make sure your study abroad experience stands out and is identified as part of the "Education" section in your resumé.

First, highlight the subjects you studied while abroad, the place where you studied, the grades you received, and the amount of time you were there. Then, if you completed an internship abroad, make sure to give this experience its own space and detail, especially if it was language intensive or provided practical work experience in your academic major. An internship like this could easily be located in a "Relevant Experience" section of your resumé or under "Education," separated from but associated with your study abroad program.

If you are applying for a position that involves travel or significant work with overseas offices or customers, it can also be relevant to list the countries you visited. If you only traveled to a few countries then you may want to skip this idea, but if you have traveled to more than 10 countries, you may want to add a "Countries Visited" section toward the end of your resumé. This will show you have already been exposed to a variety of cultures and that you are well-traveled, suggesting you will require less preparation and hand-holding when it comes to this part of the job. This also reflects an interest in travel, adventure, self-reliance, and heightened cross-cultural sensitivity. Don't list countries you only spent a day or two in, only those where you really spent some time and could discuss them in an interview or conversation.

THE INTERVIEW

Although you are excited about your study abroad experience, not everyone will be, so make sure that you mention it at the right time during your interview and focus on its relevance to the position for which you are applying. Remember, first impressions are key and anything on your resumé is fair game for questioning.

If the employer asks about your travels as a conversation starter, use the opportunity to break the ice and highlight it as a life-changing experience. Be prepared and articulate—talk about deciding to study abroad, where you traveled, and what you learned. If the employer incorporates study abroad into an interview question, then answer that question only, being brief, focused, and clear in your response. Often returnees get carried away with enthusiasm, going off on tangents and rekindling memories or situations that happened overseas. You can easily lose your potential employer in a long-winded and vague response, making your study abroad experience more hurtful than helpful in the interview.

What if your employer doesn't bring up your study abroad experience? Then you should. Find ways to integrate your experience tactfully and specifically into your answers. For example, if you are applying for a position that requires frequent use of the Spanish language or communication with clients in Latin American countries, talk about your study abroad experience in Mexico and your comfort and skill level with the language. If you are applying for a business position and you had a marketing internship in Australia, talk about that experience, your responsibilities, and your ability to work in another culture, as well as the similarities and differences you perceived, especially in connection with the business culture or office environment. If you are applying for a social justice or community service position, then talk about your involvement in the host community, such as any service-learning projects you completed or volunteering you did.

You can and should always find a relevant way to incorporate your study abroad experience into an interview. In many ways this experience sets you apart from your peers, bringing a completely different skill set and outlook to a potential employer. As a study abroad returnee, you have gained a tremendous amount of transferable skills during your study abroad experience. These may seem general to you and go overlooked or unmentioned in an interview, but they can almost always connect in some way to any job description.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

Transferable skills are skills you have gained, in this case specifically through your study abroad experience, that are beneficial to the position for which you are applying. Spend some time reflecting on your time overseas and what you learned from the experience. Think about the person you were before you left and how you changed during your time overseas. Studying abroad is often an eye-opening and self-changing experience. Be prepared to discuss this. And, be prepared to discuss the skills, credentials, and awareness you gained, as this can be attractive to potential employers.

Study abroad reflects independence, cultural sensitivity and awareness, self-confidence and reliance, as well as language proficiency. Other new skills can include problem solving, dealing with ambiguity, managing a limited budget, handling situations diplomatically, and acting as an ambassador and a leader. Students also gain an international perspective and country-specific skills that can be useful for potential employers when thinking about a certain market, overseas office, or customer base. Carefully read the job description for your desired position: what specific skills are mentioned and what can you pull from your study abroad experience to strengthen your case? Make a list of your transferable skills and the job qualifications, and then match them up, being sure to highlight these in both your resumé and interview.

THE 7 GLOBAL SKILLS

According to Marie-Louise Hansson, a Swedish career adviser and author of *The Global Business Person: What is the Secret for Success* (www.goinglobal.com), there are seven global skills. In looking at this list below, you will find that most of these skills are gained, strengthened, and highlighted through any study abroad experience:

1. The ability to deal with ambiguity and constant change—and love it.
2. The ability to be informed about the industry and where the power is located.
3. The ability to take moderate risks and step forward in an unfamiliar situation.
4. The ability to act in a diplomatic way and build lasting relations—in the real and in the virtual world.
5. The ability to create visions about the future and how you, and your organization, fit into the larger picture.
6. The ability to create strategies as well as put them into practical plans and actions.
7. The ability to execute leadership, regardless of position, and have respect for different nationalities, cultures, and religions.

RISKS AND STEREOTYPES ASSOCIATED WITH STUDYING ABROAD

There are certain stereotypes sometimes associated with study abroad returnees and assumptions that employers may have about job candidates who have spent considerable time abroad. Prospective employers may feel like returnees have wanderlust, making it difficult to settle down and stay in one place. They may be concerned about a lack of commitment or a sense of independence that makes for ineffective team players. There is also the unknown factor: employers who have not traveled extensively and who can't relate to your experience abroad may not appreciate how beneficial it can be for their company's needs. Finally, an employer may actually challenge your reasons for wanting to study abroad, possibly wondering why you left America to gain the experience you did.

You can use several tactics to dispel these stereotypes and overcome these concerns. First, in an interview make sure you articulate why you are applying for the position, why you feel you are an excellent fit, and how the experience you gained overseas is relevant to the particular job, the overall company mission/strategy, and the needs of the company. During the interview, clarify that you are happy to be home and begin your career, referencing what draws you to the area and the position. Be prepared to discuss your future career goals and how you fit into the organization over your longer-term plans and path.

Demonstrating that you have researched the position and the company is always helpful before interviewing, but relating your study abroad experience to company objectives and showing attachment to the area reassures your potential employer that you are serious about your career, helping to overcome typical study-abroad stereotypes.