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# The Rise of the ‘Expat-preneur’

By Kaitlin Solimine



JFDI.Asia

On a weeknight in Singapore, I found myself in a speakeasy bar sipping cocktails with some of the city's top startups and investors. As local and expat entrepreneurs mingled, I was struck by how comfortable the expats were in this foreign startup environment and how many had successfully built companies there.

I wanted to know: What was it that drew these expats to such risky endeavors, often leaving behind family and comfortable salaried jobs?

For decades, expats have been sent abroad by multinationals—a 2011 survey by Brookfield Global Relocation Services found that 58% of company revenues were generated outside the country of a company's headquarters. But the tide is shifting. We're now experiencing the rise of a new kind of expat—the “expat-preneur,” a term coined by Dr. Yvonne McNulty, a scholar of expat culture at SIM University in Singapore, and her colleagues.

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The expat-preneur is a traditional expatriate with an entrepreneurial nature. And while not every expat-preneur story is the same, there are some core similarities that help shape the rise of this expat subset.

**Lifestyle Matters**

Increasingly for expat-preneurs, being abroad isn't just part of a business plan, but often stems from a lifestyle choice. This could arise via a point of inflection in their lives—divorce, university graduation, career transition, or being a trailing spouse—or simply be part of a plan to live abroad and to take risks otherwise unavailable at home.

Dr. Julie Goldstein, founder of MotherNist.com, a digital platform catering to women, had started a family and a business in London when she realized the city didn't fit her and her husband's aspirations in the long term.

"Singapore being the gateway to Southeast Asia was quite an easy sell for the project I'd already started, so I just changed the business plan, and, in any case, was planning to be more mobile so it made sense to move," she says.

A sense of adventure is often at the core of the expat-preneur's impetus to start a business abroad.

"Success for me and my circle of friends is to own our own time and freedom," says Chris Osborne, a British entrepreneur in Asia who lives out of a well-worn suitcase and founded Founders Grid, which creates tools and services for startups. "This is a different mentality to what startup founders, especially those who are funded, have when located in the major startup ecosystems, for example Silicon Valley."

### **Bridging the Divide**

Being a foreigner in a new place is part of what makes expat-preneurs good at judging market needs and new opportunities from the outside. Still, it's a combination of that outsider viewpoint with an insider's knowledge that is often most fruitful for early ventures.

Snehal Patel worked alongside Singaporean Vas Metupalle to help found MyDoc, a technology platform to improve healthcare communication based in the city-state. He says that "the humility you gain from being in a foreign country is absolutely critical to being successful in the long run."

For Tomas Laboutka, co-founder of HotelQuickly, an app for booking hotels at the last minute, being local is not just part of the equation, it's everything.

"The biggest danger of being an expat is you think 'I'm the expert' and that's it," he says. "Never build a wall of 'expat' and 'local'. Instead, the question should be: 'I just arrived—how does my business become local?'"

Likewise, there are far-reaching benefits of expat-driven businesses to the local economy. Prof. McNulty and her colleagues cite in a coming paper that "these spillover effects may be especially pronounced for emerging markets in building local economic vitality and enhancing local professional practice and the labor skill base."



A cooking class at Expat Kitchen.

## Tapping the Potential

Expatpreneurs are adept at seeing and seizing market opportunities, wherever they might be.

In Southeast Asia, the expanding middle class is a powerful attraction.

“The big untapped potential is in Southeast Asia,” National University of Singapore Professor Poh Kam Wong says.

“In Singapore specifically, there’s also a strong infrastructure already in place, as well as stellar support from the government,” says Cameron Priest, co-founder of TradeGecko.com, a cloud-based commerce platform for retailers, wholesalers and traders. “This translates into easier access to capital, and easier access to target markets.”

Annette Lang, founder of Expat Kitchen, didn’t just take advantage of a foreign market, but specifically the expats with whom she shared a community. In starting cooking classes for expats’ domestic helpers and others in Singapore, she saw a market need and jumped on it.

“I thought it’s got to be addressed because no one is doing it and what a strange thing that no one thought to start a business like this,” she says.

Hugh Mason, co-founder of startup accelerator JFDI.Asia, sums up the idea this way: “When you launch a business, you’re competing with the world, so why not think of yourself as a citizen of the world and go where opportunity is strongest?”



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