

**TRAVELS TO ONESELF: A Psychological Analysis
of How Study Abroad and Positive Regression
Impact Personal Growth and Behaviour**

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical analysis and retrospective study explores the psychology of travel, and how and why study abroad impacts self-awareness, personal growth, behaviour, and career choice. International travellers often experience something far beyond the acquisition of new subject matter or cultural awareness—they undergo a personal paradigm shift that alters their perception of themselves and their world in such a way as to clarify areas of their lives that were previously unclear. This sometimes occurs by re-experiencing regressive situations from earlier childhood stages of development in the more secure adult years. Transformative learning is a dialectic, experiential form of learning through which one re-examines and changes perceptions, values, and behaviour.

Positive regression is defined as a temporary retreat to earlier forms of behaviour while under stress that leads to disharmony, self-evaluation, reflection, reintegration, and enhanced self-awareness. Some have portrayed adjustment as a series of psychological stages but few researchers have used an integrated theoretical methodology and the concepts of positive regression to explain and understand how adjustment and transformation occurs. This paper compares regressive experiences to the stages of developmental psychology, and offers some reasons why study abroad impacts self-image and personal growth.

With the dawning of the 21st century, positive psychology has emerged as a field in its own right. Travel and multicultural encounters provide opportunities for learning and self-analysis, far beyond the scope of traditional education. These experiences can transform individuals, organizations, and society.

1. Introduction.

All people have a destiny to fulfil, regardless of their geographic location or status in society. One of the primary challenges in human growth and development is for individuals to explore their talents and uniqueness, and develop their “gifts” in order to establish a *raison d’être* on this planet. It is not enough to learn just the basic facts and skills required to survive. People have unique, personal dreams that make them immortal through following a purposeful path and completing accomplishments to offer future generations, either individually or fulfilling part of a collective task. They must find a way to understand themselves better and develop goals that match their inherent talents or life may seem a prolonged and tedious pattern of work and bills, or the proverbial “birth, death, and taxes.” How, then, can greater internal awareness be accomplished?

People are influenced by family, friends, relatives, peers, social mores, inherited skills, media, and their immediate environment. Some seek self-awareness and growth through joining psychotherapy groups, entering into individual long-term psychoanalysis, following a training regimen such as for an athlete, exploring family genealogy, or immersing themselves in a religious philosophy or cultural activities, etc. Although such programs usually do result in an increase in personal awareness and expression when utilized for self-growth, they can be very slow and extremely expensive, either in direct cost or indirect loss of income. Is there a way to jump start this process and fast forward through the experiences needed to explore self-identity? The answer for this researcher, and for many others, has been through international travel (Kauffmann, 1983; Kennedy, 1994; Kottler, 1997).

Experiencing the diversity of other cultures allows people to perceive alternate forms of behaviour and cognition, and to question their own beliefs and attitudes through a multitude of factors that utilize all the senses. Often persons returning from their first sojourn abroad make

statements like “This trip transformed me,” “I became more my own person,” “Now I know what I want to do with my life,” etc. (Kauffmann, 1983; Desruisseaux, 1998). These travellers have experienced something far beyond acquisition of new subject matter or cultural awareness—they have undergone a kind of personal paradigm shift. A cognitive jolt, or *mindquake*, has altered their perception of themselves and their world in such a way as to clarify areas of their lives that were previously unclear. Just what caused this change—how can it be explained?

The theories of developmental psychology help define how people acquire new behavioural skills as they pass through stages of growth. There are many conceptual frameworks, such as the developmental theories of Piaget (1969) and Erikson (1968) that help to define transformative learning that involves a substantive, qualitative shift in perception. In addition, international treatises on deep learning, change learning, or transformative learning (noted by a variety of names) focus on learning that occurs from a change in perception or personal view. Developmental “triggers” that cause change to occur have been described abstractly (Kauffmann, 1983; Hansel, 1985), but few have been explored empirically, partly due to the difficulty in defining, obtaining, and measuring reliable data. There is a strong link between this shift and learning. The developmental process is a form of transformative learning about knowledge and self-identity.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Most study abroad, international work, and travel programs state that personal growth and transformative changes occur (Kauffmann, 1983; Kennedy, 1994; Kottler, 1997), but few studies have researched or attempted to explain how the phenomena unfold relative to theories of developmental psychology. Anecdotal self-reports, surveys, and ethnographic observational descriptions are more common. Researchers agree that it is difficult to measure the benefits of study abroad programs. Factors such as advanced preparation, expectations, length of program,

course content, attitude and personality characteristics of the traveller, depth of immersion, and post-study follow-up may not all be present, and research design is diverse and not amenable to meta-analysis. In addition, consensus does not exist regarding what assessment instruments should be used to measure change.

Some have portrayed adjustment as a series of psychological stages. But few researchers have used an integrated theoretical methodology and the concepts of positive regression (Dabrowski, 1964) to explain and understand how adjustment and personal transformative changes occur during living in diverse cultures. This paper focusses on a study that addressed the following problems: (a) What are the effects of study and travel abroad on personal growth (identity, personality, and adaptation) and career selection, and (b) Do patterns of adaptation mimic earlier developmental stages?

1.2 Positive psychology

Positive psychology emerged as an important psychological field at the turn of the last century. This specialty encompasses the science of positive subjective experience, individual traits, and institutions that strive to improve the quality of life for all people. The positive emphasis is in direct contrast to the dominant psychological focus in the past that has stressed pathology. According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), psychologists, teachers, and parents should seek to help others through “identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, what they are best at, and helping them find niches in which they can best live out these strengths” (p. 6). Practitioners should amplify good abilities in addition to noting weaker challenges. Psychologists who want to improve the human condition are in a position to help everyone, not just those who suffer. “The majority of ‘normal’ people also need examples and advice to reach a richer and more fulfilling existence” (p. 10).

In a shift of focus from a disease model of pathology to a more positive growth model, psychologists are beginning to promote traits like wisdom and morality. Martin Seligman (2000) is at the forefront of this movement toward “positive psychology.” This new field includes: (1) study of subjective well-being, optimism, and contentment; (2) study of positive individual traits like integrity and vocational wisdom; and (3) study of positive institutions. People’s values and goals mediate between external events and the perceived quality of these experiences. “It is not what happens to people that determines how happy they are, but how they interpret what happens” (p. 9). Thus, experiential learning that opens new horizons in cultural awareness should expand self-understanding, increasing options for personal success.

2. Related Literature.

Travel and study abroad can influence our understanding of global issues, interpersonal relations, and career selection, as well as personal growth and self-image. For purposes of this study personal growth includes changes in self-identity, personality, and adaptability. Some additional factors that have been explored by others relative to study abroad outcomes include world-mindedness, ethnocentrism, tolerance, flexibility, self-esteem, autonomy, confidence, refined career goals, foreign language ability, interest in international affairs, political orientation, prejudices, tolerance of ambiguity, grades, attitude toward diverse cultures, and concern for others (Kauffmann, 1983).

Because language has imbedded within it a certain way of perceiving the world (sentence structure and idiomatic expressions), and the global economy affects most industries, it is important to have some exposure to foreign languages, culture, and diversity (McCully, 1976). This learning is expedited through travel. Without multicultural knowledge people often have a narrow approach to cognition that may lead to failure in the global business world. Erichsen (2012) stated that international learning involves integration, connection, adaptation, a

perspectival shift, and identity development through differentiation and reinventing oneself within a new context.

Until recently, cognitive learning was believed to reach completion at the end of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Piaget, 1969), but current meta-theories identify new learning stages into the adult years (Basseches, 1984; Moshman, 1999). Each stage is unique, where new behaviour and responses are established, moving from simple to more complex activities (Erikson, 1968; Piaget, 1969; Chickering, 1969; Kohlberg, 1984). People learn new skills, attitudes, and knowledge that are appropriate to their maturation, physical makeup, individual traits, and social environment.

Psychological growth is often described in sequential stages, where individuals must master the tasks of one stage or they will have difficulty advancing to the next one. What happens if the basic skills are not adequately learned? Is there a way to “go back” and repeat earlier experiences? Psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that voluntary analysis or therapy was a means of personal growth for everyone, not merely a treatment for mental problems. Success was achieved not just by removing maladaptive behaviour but by reviewing the past and developing a new inner psychological perspective (McCully, 1976).

Not everyone achieves growth in personality and awareness through travel. There is some degree of attrition in study abroad programs when students are unable to cope with new experiential demands. Adler (1975) describes a framework for training and counselling strategies during adaptation that is developmental (the psychological aspects of adaptation) rather than adjustive (learning language, history, culture, and social skills). When new emotions are seen and understood experientially, self-awareness and personal growth can occur. “The transitional experience is, finally, a journey into the self” (p. 22).

The challenge-response theory of Piaget (1969) defines one process of psychological development. Learning is facilitated by exposure to situations and ideas that cannot be

understood within an individual's perception or worldview. Previously learned responses are no longer effective. If challenges are not present, development will cease—if too great, development will stop. Perry (1970) defined an important difference between adolescent and adult thinking. Whereas adolescents regard the world in polarities (e.g., right vs. wrong, us vs. them), adults emerge from this *dualistic thinking* toward *multiple thinking*, as they begin to see other types of effective cognition and develop new opinions. Experience in other cultures increases awareness of alternate cognitive styles and may enhance this transitional process.

There is evidence that certain types, forms, or levels of cognition are common among young adults but are rarely seen in childhood (Moshman, 1999). One well-known theory concerning a state of cognitive maturity beyond Piaget's fourth and final stage of formal operations is dialectical thinking (Basseches, 1984). This "fifth stage" emphasizes a transformative reality in which a set of relationships continuously changes over time and is understood in a subjective context. This type of cognition, which involves processing, knowing, and thinking, is necessary to appreciate the physical and socially complex realities of an interrelated world. Perry (1970) named the stage beyond Piaget's operational stage the "period of responsibility."

Selecting a rewarding occupation is a complex undertaking. In the 1990s career instability and choice became critical life issues. James Marcia (1980) extended Erikson's work on identity formation to include: (1) a transition from no direction or interest in making a commitment; (2) a decision based on ideas from others; (3) an internal struggle with choices and issues; and (4) finally arriving at a relatively firm vocational commitment. By learning more about themselves, people can implement goals and develop careers that lead to greater success and fulfilment.

The psychology of travel attempts to explain the impact a sojourn abroad has on personal growth (identity, personality, and adaptability). This theme has been overlooked in the fields of

psychology and psychiatry, except for marketing tourism, or training government and military workers for global jobs. Psychologist Jeffrey Kottler (1997) described an international learning process where learning takes place through travel, regardless of intent or pre-planning:

Traveling can bring out in you parts of yourself that can't be accessed any other way. Always looking for more efficient and effective ways to promote personal change, I realized that most of the constructive growth I've undergone in my own life has not come from books, or the classroom, or even therapy, but from traveling. . . . Travel teaches you most about yourself—about what you miss when you are gone and what you don't, about what you are capable of doing in strange circumstances. (Kottler, 1997, Preface, p. x)

Karimi *et al.* (2013) found that emotional intelligence plays a moderating role to reduce job stress. Because the international study experience can increase stress, fear, and uncertainty, Ornstein and Nelson (2006) recommend that emotional intelligence competency be incorporated into the preparation phase of international travel, to increase the ability to recognize, regulate, and control one's emotions during effective interaction with others in unexpected settings.

Travel offers more opportunities for change than almost any other human endeavour. Etiological theories of behaviour are often the result of personal experience, anthropological observations, accidental discoveries, or patterns observed in anecdotal or autobiographical books and journals. Although literature based on such naturally occurring phenomena is not scientifically controlled or validated, it is important to include some anecdotal information to assist in the initial development of a theory and to identify patterns of behaviour. With this in mind, a number of travel, biographical, and career-related articles were included in the research for this paper. Study abroad enables one to learn from and share new insights and visions with the people encountered along the way.

2.1 Self-awareness through travel

Travel is one method to increase self-awareness in a fully immersed setting. Travel journalist Pico Iyer (1998) made a simple, but profound statement about why we travel: “We travel, initially, to lose ourselves, and we travel, next, to find ourselves” (p. 32). He further

stated that one of the joys of travel is leaving beliefs and certainties at home, and seeing everything anew, where we put ourselves into situations of potential hazard in order to sharpen our lives, and are compelled for a moment to work desperately to resolve new issues, no matter what they are. This stress on transformative experience is what separates the tourist, who simply views differences from afar, and the traveller or sojourner, who strives to be a part of, and understand, new situations.

In the 19th century many artists took a “Grand Tour” of Europe, where they honed new skills and made important connections in a sort of “vocational finishing school.” The personal letters of the artists working abroad revealed that some emotional learning took place beyond the apprentice setting. Sculptor William Couper wrote a letter to his family on arrival in Germany in 1874: “I tell you it is a dazed position to be placed in not being able to speak, not knowing how to count your money, and the whole amount in knowing nothing” (Couper, 1986, p. 11).

Goodwin and Nacht (1988) noted that college students reported the overseas experience changed them in unimaginable ways! Apart from improving global knowledge, foreign travel also provided a perceptual distance with which to appreciate one’s native culture. They described a gestalt change whereby students become “more mature, sophisticated, hungry for knowledge, culturally aware, and sensitive. They learn by questioning their prejudices and all national stereotypes” (p. 12). Gary Weaver (1994) suggested possible reasons for this:

Giving up inappropriate behaviors, adjusting one’s hierarchy of values, developing new ways of solving problems, and adopting new roles involve going through a period of self-doubt, disorientation, and personal examination of one’s values and beliefs. From this perspective, the so-called ‘symptoms’ of culture shock are simply the ‘growing pains’ that lead to the development of new skills and ways of perceiving the world, greater flexibility in dealing with life’s problems, an enhanced self-awareness, and increased self-confidence. (p. 236).

Hong *et al.* (2000) described a dynamic constructivist approach to perception that allows individuals to retain multiple internalized cognitive triggers. In this model, people who have

been exposed to two cultures are triggered to react differently depending on the type of stimulus (e.g., foreign words) and the accessibility of the concept (e.g., how recently it has been reinforced). In other words, absorbing the concepts of a new culture does not always replace the ideas of the original culture, even when the two cultures contain conflicting theories. Thus, culture is not internalized as an overall mentality or world-view, but rather in the form of a loose network of domain-specific knowledge structures. By retaining both cultures individuals can use a dynamic constructivist approach to “frame switch” to select differing forms of behaviour depending on the context. Accessibility can be temporary (caused by recent priming) or chronic (maintained by frequent use). Thus, bicultural individuals may switch between cultural views, where the internalized culture is defined as a network of discrete, specific constructs that guide cognition only when they emerge in an individual’s mind.

2.2 Culture shock

According to Weinmann (1983), culture shock is a psychological condition that leads to increased awareness and personal growth because it challenges beliefs and requires the sojourner to develop new communication skills. Many believe that some degree of culture shock is inevitable and even necessary for an expanded self-awareness. The symptoms of culture shock can include physical and emotional discomfort, homesickness, and adjustment difficulties. Weaver (1994) describes three basic causal explanations: (1) the loss of familiar cues, (2) the breakdown of interpersonal communications, and (3) an identity crisis (pp. 169-171). The last one, identity crisis, implies that there is genuine psychological growth that can occur when one successfully overcomes culture shock.

Although the concept of culture shock is usually associated with negative reactions, Peter Adler (1975) stressed a more positive view in which culture shock can be viewed as an important

trigger for cultural learning, self-development, and personal growth. “Most important, the individual is capable of undergoing further dynamic transitions in life along new dimensions and of finding new ways to explore the diversity of human beings” (p. 18). New attitudes are incorporated into identity, and greater understanding leads to a heightened sense of self.

Roland Taft (1977) outlined a framework of cultural adaptation that defined commonality in a wide variety of situations. He noted four major aspects of the process: (a) cultural adjustment – the functioning of the personality; (b) identification – changes in the person’s reference groups, personal models, and social identity; (c) cultural competence – acquiring new knowledge and skill; and (d) role acculturation – adoption of new culturally defined roles (p. 146). All of these aspects apply to the way a person restructures the world, and involve cognitive, dynamic, and performance processes.

Once you have left home and experienced a new culture you will never be the same again. No one ever really *goes home*, because home isn’t just a place we inhabit; it’s a lifestyle we construct internally—a pattern of routines, habits, and behaviours that are associated with unique people, places, and things (Storti, 1965). Anthropologist Carlos Castaneda (1972) described this hauntingly in *Journey to Ixtlan*, his name for that mythical, sought-after “home”:

You will find yourself alive in an unknown land. Then, as is natural to all of us, the first thing you will want to do is to start on your way back to Los Angeles. But there is no way to go back to Los Angeles. What you left there is lost forever. . . . At a time like that what’s important to all of us is the fact that everything we love or hate or wish for has been left behind. . . . Your idea of the world [has changed] . . . and when that changes, the world itself changes. (p. 265)

2.3 *Positive regression*

Many theorists describe a type of regression, fragmentation, or emotional disintegration that occurs when individuals suddenly find themselves forced to adapt to a new situation (Erikson, 1964; Dabrowski, 1964; Perry, 1970; Brein, 1971; Adler, 1975). Whether this

experience is pathological or not depends on the type, severity, and duration of the regression. Polish psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980) developed a *Theory of Positive Disintegration* (TPD) that described how gifted children use over excitable emotion under stress to regress to earlier developmental stages, and then reintegrate their psyche through a form of auto-psychotherapy to rebalance self-identity. This regression can be a challenge. Childhood is a time of much experimentation due to lack of self-regulation and autonomy, constant dependency on others for physical and mental needs, and a lack of the skills necessary to survive.

Regarding terminology, this author prefers the phrase *positive regression* instead of *positive disintegration*, because the latter carries a “Humpty-Dumpty-esque” connotation of not being able to return to a whole. Although regression is seen as negative in the literature, it implies a temporary state from which one can return to a complete self, albeit a different self. Thus, the term *positive regression* is used in this paper to apply to behaviour characteristic of infant and early childhood limitations, where people must use adult skills to reintegrate to a functioning stage.

Perry (1970) described forms of early development that appear to repeat in later development at levels of more abstract experience, an idea that originated with Piaget’s concept of vertical *décolage*. This recapitulated development from an egocentric to a more objective position recurs at each stage of the Perry scheme. The term regression is used to mean a “retreat into previously prepared positions” and not an escape. Perry continued:

Growth, we felt, usually occurred in stages. Between the stages, a person might pause to explore the implications of his new position, or he might lie fallow, waiting for the resurgence of strength to meet the new challenge. On occasion he might even have to detach himself from the whole business, or retreat to old positions. (pp. 177-178)

Dabrowski (1964; Dabrowski and Piechowski, 1977) proposed that a strong developmental potential was genetically established, triggered by emotional overexcitement by gifted children during a crisis. But his theories apply to persons at all levels of development to some degree. Of importance is his stress that what some people regard as pathological symptoms of psychoneuroses, disintegration, or social maladjustment may actually be positive reactions, used in establishing an autonomous personality and resolving conflict. Dabrowski (1964) defined four levels of disintegration (primary, unilevel, spontaneous, multilevel) followed by reintegration. He regarded conflict as a feeling of internal inferiority toward oneself as opposed to Adler's concept of inferiority, which is based on comparison with others (Aronson, 1964, p. xvi). When stress appears, individuals are encouraged to take a developmental view of their situations. Rather than eliminate symptoms, these are reframed to yield insight and understanding into personal behaviour and choice. Experiencing crises in new situations can thus be considered a form of self psychotherapy. Psychoanalysis emphasizes a similar disequilibrium between id, ego, and superego, which may lead to pathology, new defences, exploration, and/or growth. Reality is viewed as a metaphorical screen on which one projects inner conflicts (Aronson, 1964).

John Bowlby (1982), in his studies on childhood development, discussed the concept of regression during times of anxiety or stress. Although immature behaviour persists in some adults in a psychopathic sense, there are other times when completely mature people may regress during acute sadness or emergency situations. Roland Taft (1977) wrote that "the process of adapting to a new society corresponds in some respects to that involved in becoming a member of society in the first place, although there is the important difference that resocialization and reacclimation involve a transformation of an existing state of affairs" (p. 127). He noted that, in adapting to situations of extreme cultural discontinuity, some kind of retreat might be necessary before socialization can occur. Taft continued on this theme by describing the

symptoms of culture shock: “The loss of mastery is equivalent to infantile regression; that is, the newcomer is reduced to a state of ignorance and weakness in which seemingly everyday matters have to be explained to him so that he becomes dependent” (p. 142).

In psychiatric terms, a fear of fragmentation of the personality, or disintegration anxiety, often occurs when patients are exposed to earlier experiences that interfered with development of the self. This reaction is sometimes felt as a fear of falling apart or loss of identity.

Psychoanalyst Paul Cantalupo (1978) suggested that some people succumb to psychiatric disturbances due to preadolescent parental loss (through death, or absence of one month from divorce, military duty, or illness, etc.), which causes an arrest of development. Such a person then fixates on this loss, which frequently triggers a periodic regression under stress, to the developmental levels prior to the loss. Thus, childhood events may be a factor in determining a student’s ability to adjust to a new culture, where a repeat of earlier developmental stages is part of the adjustment to new social rules. If such patterns exist, the student can “re-experience” and “relearn” behaviour patterns related to earlier loss, and thus reintegrate parts of their self-image.

Cross-cultural adaptation involves and requires both stressful and growth experiences that lead toward greater internal capacity to cope and subsequent ability to adapt. Kim and Ruben (1988) introduced the concept of regression in her theory of acculturation when she described the cultural adaptation process as consisting of transformation through successive interplay of degeneration and regeneration. In more general terms, Zikman (1999) described “relearning” earlier forms of behaviour in a “fast-forward mode” through travel:

Travel is finding solutions to problems we encounter and continuing ahead. . . .
Moments that seem like steps backwards are now recognized as steps forward. (p. 114)

We scurry up a massive learning curve. Everything is inviting. We strive to make sense of all that’s out there. As much as we can, we struggle to participate in what’s before us. We act and react. We ask and listen. We learn about the

people we meet and the places we visit. Ultimately, we learn about ourselves. (p. 69)

3. Research Methodologies.

The theory of personal growth through travel and study abroad includes the concept of positive regression. Travellers find themselves suddenly in an environment where they may re-experience the stages and challenges of earlier childhood development. A kind of “regressive self-awareness therapy” results from a retreat to earlier forms of dependent behaviour, culture shock, inability to be understood, loss of a familiar social structure, and working through reintegration. Bipolar in form, euphoric or traumatic, the severity of regression, self-evaluation, adaptation, and reintegration depends on individual personality characteristics, the availability of support during crises, emotional intelligence, and levels of ego development.

Most studies on the influence of a study abroad experience use self-report surveys. Cubillos and Ilvento (2012) investigated the impact of study abroad on self-efficacy perceptions among foreign language learners. Thirty-nine American college students taking part in a study abroad academic program completed self-efficacy surveys at the beginning and at the end of their foreign sojourns. Statistical analysis revealed that positive gain in self-efficacy perceptions were associated with the extent and type of interaction with members of the host country.

Couper (2001, 2006) compared alumni of study abroad programs to those who did not have such experience, using a set of self-report surveys to explore whether adapting to a new culture emulated earlier stages of psychological development through positive regression. Because career consolidation is not strongly formed in the first five years after graduation (Marcia, 1980; Super, 1957) alumni were selected for this study who graduated between five to seven years earlier. Findings showed that (1) one’s temperament did not determine whether the study abroad experience was effective; (2) vocational goals were toward service careers and

away from monetary pursuits; (3) childhood feelings (not actions) in times of frustration were more evident but less emotional; (4) new challenges and environments were more readily accepted; (5) time allocation was more flexible and less scheduled; and (6) corporate culture was easier to adjust to for those with experience abroad (Couper, 2001). Other cultures provide varied experiences based on their unique definitions of appropriate gender behaviour and opportunity (Couper, 2006). Thus, research on the influence of living abroad should include analysis by gender.

4. Conclusion.

This paper explored how and why travel and study abroad affect personal growth and career consolidation, and whether adapting to a new culture emulates earlier stages of psychological development through positive regression. Travel and study abroad provide excellent situations for seeing ourselves more clearly, both inwardly and from afar, in new environments with new challenges, and better understanding who we are and who we want to become.

Although much of the literature states that travel abroad impacts personal growth and career choice, very few researchers have attempted to explain why. Further research combining the concepts of positive regression, emotional intelligence, culture shock, and developmental psychology in an international setting will help to understand and design study abroad programs that are most effective in triggering personal growth and self-awareness, while simultaneously increasing academic skills, cognizance of global business practices, and cultural knowledge.

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