

# “The temptation to join a bubble is high”

Interview with Executive Coach and HR Consultant  
Susanne Habran-Jensen, working in Luxembourg since 1995

*For HR professionals, the term ‘expat’ usually refers to a contract where an executive employee is transferred from the mother company to a branch for approx. three to five years. In this interview, the term expat is used in a more colloquial way designating ‘academically qualified people’ who spend part of their professional career abroad, be they sent out or not by a mother company.*

*Compared to other EU countries, the expat population makes up an ever larger proportion of the workforce in Luxembourg. What profiles do these people typically have?*

Yes, indeed, this population is growing! Luxembourg has for many years been in the top 3 ranking of expat destinations. Many people are attracted by the standard of living in Luxembourg that is relatively high compared to other European countries. It is difficult to define a typical profile. According to the 2014 InterNations report<sup>1</sup> only about 28% of Luxembourg’s expats wanted to stay in Luxembourg in the long run, especially single expats. To them, Luxembourg is a good place to kick off or promote their careers. In addition, the central location of Luxembourg in Europe allows expats to travel around Europe. Another particularity that expats appreciate in Luxembourg aside from interesting job opportunities is the high sense of security and standard of living; the two latter elements often being better in Luxembourg than in other European capitals. *What distinguishes Luxembourg as a workplace and living environment from other international business locations?*

Overall, I would say that most expats are satisfied with their jobs in Luxembourg and if they are not, they tend to change jobs rather easily which is generally more straight forward in Luxembourg than in other international business locations. I have observed that many expats end up staying longer in Luxembourg than they originally planned, mostly because of better career prospects. In addition to job satisfaction, I often get the feedback that expats appreciate Luxembourg very much for the work-life balance it offers. I have several clients who came to Luxembourg from other international locations and started a family here, and who,

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against their original beliefs, decided to stay. Regularly, I receive feedbacks along the lines of: “a good balance between my professional and personal life was impossible when I worked in XYZ where I would spend three hours in public transportation/car every day only to come home in the evenings to say goodnight to my kids and then fall asleep in front of the television.”

Another observation I made is that “Luxembourg can offer a ‘faster track’ for career-oriented people than many other European countries”. If you go the extra

mile, you are likely to be identified and put on a ‘faster track’. 64% of expats report easier attainable career opportunities in Luxembourg, and often find employment on their own. Since 1995, I have followed several committed and hard-working people who came to Luxembourg as young professionals with good academic backgrounds, yet not from the top business schools. However, when these people compared themselves to former classmates from their home countries, they would often find that they landed the jobs they initially aimed for much earlier.

*How do expats deal with Luxembourg’s cultural and linguistic diversity?*

Because the level of English in Luxembourg is quite high in general, many many expats who speak neither German nor French stick to English, especially if this is the language used in their professional context. This may however cause problems when exploring new job opportunities outside the company. The lack of language skills can even be the reason for expats to return to their home countries.

Nevertheless, many expats consider multilingualism an opportunity. Those who decide to learn French often tell me that this is mainly due to the fact that they live close to town within a ‘French context’. Some young expat parents report that they regret not mastering the German language when their children start ‘Spillschoul’ where German is important. And while expat parents may feel overwhelmed

with the language barriers at times, their kids are less inhibited. They experience it as rather normal that their parents have difficulties communicating in the country's official languages. Luxembourgish children on the other hand are very accommodating, flexible and open to other languages due their high exposure to multilingualism and diversity from an early age.

*What practical and psychological challenges do expats face when they arrive in Luxembourg?*

For most expats, the practical part of relocation is fairly smooth, even for those that have not mastered French or German. The Luxembourg administrations have staff who can communicate in several languages and they are often perceived as helpful, flexible and understanding. Even if a lot of expats consider the housing costs to be high, most manage to find something within their budget range. The biggest challenge can be schooling, which is simultaneously a practical, social and psychological challenge. But this is a different topic, on which I shall not comment further here. Yet it is always the first concern to expat families, and only once the school decision has been taken care of, the expat family will look for a rental home.

With regard to the psychological challenges, a recurrent theme is missing a personal support network (family and friends), although, thanks to social media, it has become much easier to stay in contact. Another challenge is the adjustment to a different business culture, which can range from lacking a professional network in the host country to coming from countries with flat organisational hierarchies having to get along with the "vous" or "surnames"—details that may go unnoticed during the recruitment process but become manifest in work contexts. Learning about a new business culture can be very rewarding and also very painful. Open-mindedness and flexibility are often useful ingredients to handle these issues.

I believe that it's very important to spend energy on private integration, with a focus on the local population. By local I mean Luxembourg nationals as well as other foreigners who have settled down and taken roots. Since staying within a group of

friends consisting solely of expats may lead these people to stay in a bubble, usually for two or three years. Thus, if the person stays in the country for a longer period of time, they might have friends frequently leaving. Some expats even told me that, after a while, they did not even want to make new friends, as they will leave. To avoid this psychological challenge becoming a problem, finding something you feel passionate about that involves other people may be a great way to make lasting friendships. It does not matter whether this is learning the language, taking an acting class or volunteering. Just make sure that it involves being around other people, as there's nothing like bonding over a common interest to pave the way to friendship.

Between 2013 and 2015, together with SpouseCare in Denmark, I created a program for the Copenhagen major's office. This program aimed at integrating expats in the Copenhagen region in a more sustainable way. We focused on the integration of expat spouses since statistics showed that one of the main reasons why expats would leave, was the lack of integration of the expat spouse. It had rarely anything to do with the job integration of the expat, nor with children's school integration. The biggest challenge occurred when the accompanying spouse/partner did not find the expected job or/and the expected social setting.

*We often hear the term "expat-bubble". What is meant by this term and does it apply to Luxembourg?*

A high number of expats can create parallel communities especially within smaller countries or bigger cities. These rather closed community is what you call an "expat-bubble". Because Luxembourg has a high amount of expats, there is room for bubbles. My observation has been that those expats often live a life where they stay in an expat mindset. This mindset is not very beneficial to integration and can cause people to forget that their degree of integration largely depends on themselves. It takes a certain amount of energy and perseverance to integrate, after all. The longer they postpone this process, the more energy it will take. Precisely because Luxembourg has so many expats – and

within a small distance – from the same home countries, the temptation to join and get stuck in a bubble is high.

*Talking about integration, does social media have an impact on the integration of an expat?*

It has indeed. In one way, social media helps expats stay connected to their home countries. The drawback of social media is that some are so busy making sure to still be part of their home network that it does not further their integration process. I have heard of expats leaving work in the evening to go home and eat with their families over Skype. When this occasionally occurs, it can properly give benefit to all. Yet, when this becomes frequent, it may be a sign for expats that they should have stayed in their home countries.

On a different note, social media increasingly supports establishing friendships and partnerships. WhatsApp, Facebook groups and dating applications such as Tinder can allow for a smoother integration by avoiding the feeling of loneliness and by fostering contacts with people outside work.

*Is Luxembourg a place where it's easy to settle in for the expats?*

The Inter-nations survey from 2014 states that 67% of Luxembourg expats have solely expat friends. In the overall "settling-in" ranking, Luxembourg ranks 32nd out of 61. The settling-in ranking results out of the following factors: feeling welcome, friendliness, finding friends, and language. Even if Luxembourg's ranking is not very high, it is still much higher than that of many other EU countries with especially the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and France ranking much lower. It is however striking that the top 20 countries which are easiest to settle into happen to be, with one exception, namely Ireland, countries where it's warm and the sun shines most of the year. Hence, being outside of our homes does make it easier to meet people and get integrated.

*Thank you very much for these explanations! (20.1.2019 / JST) ♦*

1 See [www.internations.org/expat-insider/2014](http://www.internations.org/expat-insider/2014)