



Photo submitted

Question & Answer

Global Head of Product Management for UBS Trusts & Foundations describes life and work on the other side of the world.

By Annie Flachsbarth, BA '07

Even with today's advanced technology, **John Shoemaker, '04**, insists that face-to-face communication is still the best way to get the job done. So when he joined UBS Wealth Planning in 2010, he and his wife, Kelli, moved from Topeka to Switzerland to be closer to his team. Recently, however, UBS' focus has shifted to the Asia-Pacific region, necessitating a move from Zurich to Singapore to be closer to the "developing markets."

While relocating internationally multiple times in six years might fill some individuals with anxiety, Shoemaker takes it as just another facet of the job. He also has a good friend in a former Washburn University School of Law professor who has encouraged and supported him throughout his global pursuits.

Here, Shoemaker shares how his Washburn Law "family" has continued to nurture his career over the years, as well as some of the challenges he's encountered in his time abroad.

First things first, what made you decide to go to Washburn Law? I have wanted to be a lawyer for as long as I can remember, but two rather closely connected reasons led me to Washburn Law: the non-traditional student emphasis and proximity to home. I knew I would be working full time, and I wanted to be able to continue my improvisational and acting pursuits while also having an opportunity to excel at school.

How did Washburn Law prepare you for working internationally? Washburn Law provides high-quality academics with translatable skills across many different industries. I believe you don't go to law school to learn a trade — you go to train your brain to think critically. You learn to deconstruct things and put them back together in a more efficient manner, and that's a skill you can use in any area of the law.

Washburn Law also opened doors to many friendships that have led me down this international path. In fact, Peter and Deborah Cotorceanu are the main reason I am where I am today. Peter was my legal research and writing and Trust Law professor at Washburn Law and without his support and confidence in me (especially through the deaths of my parents and my eventual move to join him in Switzerland), I would never have had the opportunities I have received. Deborah has been a tremendous friend to Kelli and me and has taught us much about adapting to challenging circumstances. They are a shining example of the Washburn Law family looking after its own.

What drives your passion for global practice?

I have a fascination with the development of global fiduciary law, and I love the duality of what I do. It's a field which has several hundred years of well-developed, jurisdictional-specific law, but it is constantly breaking new ground globally. I get the opportunity to both learn and shape new developments. The automatic exchange of information regime is a perfect example. I feel very proud of UBS' global role in leading the developing approach to demand accountability in justifying the legitimate purposes for wealth planning structuring. When you take the time to learn various global systems and ensure strong data protections, transparency to government entities does not need to create any sense of fear among clients.

What challenges have you experienced working abroad?

Language is obviously a big barrier, more so in Switzerland, but even in Singapore, Singlish can be challenging to understand. Taxes are also incredibly complicated and paperwork intensive for American expats.

One of the biggest challenges has been facing discrimination for the first time in my life. I see how it feels to be different as an outsider and what it's like to struggle to adjust to a new culture. It gives me a better understanding of the problems created by very simple day-to-day discriminations. All Americans would benefit from traveling and seeing this phenomenon first-hand.

Working abroad has also taught me the benefits of assimilation. Kelli and I have worked hard to change our behaviors and acclimate to the cultures in which we have lived. I think that is respectful, and I have seen other expats struggle because they want the local system to adapt to them.

I also don't know if we'll ever get used to the constantly humid, 90-degree days of Singapore. We definitely miss the changing seasons of Zurich and Topeka.

Do you have any tips for adapting to different cities and cultures? First, learn the language. You owe the effort to those around you. Next, embrace the culture. Participate in festivals, community events and make little changes to your American lifestyle. Finally, remember that people are people. Despite what you may have seen or read in the news, the biggest lesson I have learned is that people around the world are not that different from one another.

Zurich, Switzerland; Singapore — what's next? I love what I do, and I've settled into a nice little niche in a developing area of the law. I foresee a lot of work in the APAC region for many years to come with tax amnesties and international exchange of information, but there are many opportunities coming up in Central and South America as well. I would also love to get into teaching at some point in the future. It's a way of passing experiences to the next generation of attorneys and honoring those who did the same for me.



From Left: Former Professor Peter Cotorceanu, John Shoemaker, '04, Kelli Shoemaker, and Deborah Cotorceanu. Photo submitted.