

“SWEDES ABROAD ARE AN UNTAPPED ASSET ...

GLOBAL SWEDES

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Louise Svanberg, Chairman of the Board of Swedes in the World (SVIV).



Louise Svanberg. Photo: Bengt Säll

Louise Svanberg is Chairman of the Board of Swedes in the World (SVIV). She is the former CEO of EF Education First, the world's largest private educational company. She joined the company in 1985 and became CEO in 2002. In 2004, Louise was named the Most Powerful Swedish Business Woman by the economics magazine *Veckans Affärer*. She also ranked No. 35 on Fortune Magazine's list of the 50 Most Powerful Women in Business. She was awarded the Franklin D. Roosevelt Humanitarian Award, as well as the European Union Business Women Award as one of the ten most powerful business women in Europe. Louise serves as a member of the Board of Directors of Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, of Essity, Sweden and of CERAS Health, New York.

Please tell us where you were born and where you grew up.

I was born in Stockholm by two very nice parents. My dad had lived a long time in Asia. However, they discovered that they had different definitions of what to call “home”. My dad moved back to Singapore and my mom stayed in Stockholm. I spent a lot of my youth travelling back and forth between Asia and Europe. I felt equally at home in both places.

I graduated in Economics from the University of Stockholm and earned degrees in languages and political science at Sorbonne in Paris. I lived in Paris, Lugano, Milan, Rome and Zurich. One thing became clear to me: you will be changed forever after having lived abroad.

In 1985 I ended up in Boston after being offered an interesting job with EF Education First. I didn't feel very American and agreed to the position for one year only. Now, 32 years later, I am still here and loving it. My husband Carl-Henric Svanberg and I spend most of our time in Boston and Stockholm. Between us we have six children – two here in Boston.

Tell us about the barriers Swedish expat professionals encounter when returning to Sweden.

One thing I hear often is that Swedes returning home after a number of years find it difficult to re-integrate

into the company and into Swedish society. Also, the companies sometimes acknowledge that they could do a better job of re-integration, and especially of taking full advantage of the returnees' valuable experience and cultural awareness. You need, however, to be flexible, either with the timing of your return or on the type of job you wish for – you can rarely have both.

It can take time to rebuild a social network. Often, expats form their own networks to share their experiences, and one of the roles SVIV plays is to participate in those networks. We can offer practical advice regarding schools, healthcare issues, etc., to bring the networks up to date.

Many other countries experience the same difficulties. For many years, highly ambitious Asians have applied to American universities and colleges, and many have remained in the U.S. to pursue great careers. But a new trend has emerged, in that Asians countries are increasingly encouraging these graduates to return to seize new opportunities. The same thing is happening with students from countries like Germany, France, the US ... but not Sweden.

It is fine to send people out in the world to gain valuable experience,

but the true value is if we can attract them to return later. This is what is called “brain circulation”. Sweden doesn't quite appreciate the tremendous value that returning Swedish expats represent. We have more multinational companies per capita than any other country. One key reason, I believe, is our long-standing tradition of being open-minded, traveling abroad, speaking foreign languages, integrating in foreign cultures and then coming back. The low level of “brain circulation” is an untapped prerequisite for Sweden's continued international competitiveness. To find a top job, whether private, public or in academia, there is a growing expectation that you should have worked abroad.

How does SVIV interact with the Swedish government to lower these barriers for returning expats?

We are working with the Department of Justice to find ways of facilitating the integration of foreign spouses in terms of residence and working permits. SVIV has also been approached by the government to use our nearly 100 representatives around the world to report on Swedish expats' concerns. These concerns may have to do with passports, visas, work permits and jobs for spouses, and how to trans-

late children's grades from foreign schools to Swedish equivalents. The reason the government has asked SVIV for help is that we have more direct contact with individual expats.

Do you foresee any interest in SVIV and the Swedish government to collaborate with Swedish Press in supporting expats?

First of all, *Swedish Press* is doing a great job raising the above issues by publishing related articles.

One reason why married Swedes are reluctant to move abroad nowadays is that often both husband and wife have parallel careers, so if one of them is offered a career-enhancing position abroad, the accompanying spouse is unlikely to find a similar opportunity. We have therefore instituted a program called the *medföljarprogrammet*, in which the spouse is invited to join the local SVIV, work with us, represent us, taking on assignments from us – voluntary work that helps enrich his/her own CV while abroad. The program also aims to facilitate job-seeking and social re-integration for returning spouses.

Another program aims to develop a better appreciation of “brain circulation” among companies and other institutions. The more people who know about these two programs, the better, and *Swedish Press* serves an important role by increasing awareness of these in North America. [*Swedish Press publicized both programs through Cecilia Borglin's*

articles in our February, March and April 2020 issues.]

Lastly, in these unprecedented Corona times, we have had very constructive discussions with Sweden's Foreign Minister, Ann Linde, how to work together to support Swedes living or traveling in North America. We would look for Swedish local residents to act as “mini-ambassadors”, to offer advice to trapped Swedish visitors in practical matters and also offer emotional support.

Swedes abroad are an untapped asset that Sweden should be very grateful to have.

In which area do you feel Sweden contributes most globally?

The U.S. has an endless number of technology companies – Amazon, Google, Facebook, to name a few. Sweden does not have many big tech companies, but we have a large number of smaller ones. Google and others buy our embryo companies for a lot of money, which is a pity for Sweden, because we should hang on to them. We also have a long tradition on the cultural side, such as in film and music. For being such a small country, we are quite versatile.

Another area where Swedes contribute globally is in leadership. Many companies are thriving because of our open, non-hierarchical, transparent leadership style – an approach which is also one of our great exports.

Interviewed by Peter Berlin