

# **US Emigration**

**How Scattered and Questionable Emigration Resources Add to Anxiety and Uncertainty**

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# Introduction and Overview

## Introduction

Emigration, or the act of leaving one's own country to settle permanently in another, is a major life-changing event that involves major research, planning, coordination, execution, and adaption. Americans wishing to embark on this life-changing journey oftentimes must rely on a multitude of different online resources (blogs, forums, government websites), to make the move a successful one. At any of the three main phases (conception, transition, and integration), there lies major potential for confusion, stress, and possibly abandonment with the entire process altogether.

The Conception phase is where the idea begins and lasts until one gets their visa and sets a departure date. This is where all of the upfront research takes place and is critical to deciding whether or not emigrating will work for oneself. The Transition phase begins once one has their visas and ends once they land in their new country. This phase involves massive coordination of things like employment arrangements, selling of properties, and banking set up. Finally, the Integration phase involves adapting to one's new country. This phase is largely contextual and can range in length depending on the level of what emotional safety nets one has available to them.

## Problem Statement

Emigrating out of the United States is an unnecessary challenge due to extensive bureaucracy, paperwork deadline coordination, and scattered online

resources, which results in avoidable stress from superfluous planning and research. This study will examine the many stressors and impacts caused by this, resulting in a design solution to be implemented after this class.

## **Scope, Background, and Significance of Problem**

In 2016, the State Department estimated that there were around 9 million Americans living overseas, an uptick of 3.3% from a 2012 estimate. Nine million is only 2.75% of the overall United States population, however, that is roughly the size of Austria's entire population. To put it into perspective, the number of United States citizens living overseas is the size of an entire first world country with a GDP of \$461 billion.

Americans involved in one of the three emigration stages struggle to find consolidated, customized resources to aid them in the overall process. Whether they are AE's (assigned expatriates) or SIE's (self-initiated expatriates), there still remains little to prepare them for the psychological and emotional stress that accompanies leaving home to live in a new country to begin a new life and possibly a new career opportunity. While AE's oftentimes receive legal, financial, and logistical support from their employer for the move, the process and experience still provides some unforeseen coordination challenges.

For SIE's, the emigration process requires additional far-flung research on various aspects of relocation such as nailing down employment opportunities (most countries require either proof of employment or minimum living expense coverage in one's bank account), importing personal belongings, and obtaining a visas or permit, to

name just a few of the primary considerations. With so many necessary hurdles to consider, there is also the schedule coordination to oversee, from initiating the emigration application process to finally settling in the new country.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This thesis focuses on researching the pain points across the three emigration phases (conception, transition, and integration) to capture trends in process bureaucracy and online resource challenges. From the conclusions made, the preliminary elements of the design solution will be brainstormed and outlined. I researched the main emigration hurdles like government bureaucracy, lifestyle and culture change management, process stressors, value considerations, and supplemental research tools.

## **Assumptions**

This research will extract and deduct the motivations, frustrations, and goals that Americans encounter in the planning, preparation, execution, and post-move stages of emigration. I began research with the assumptions that (a) there are three primary user types: those who have emigrated, those who have done research on emigrating, and those who have never had any interest in emigrating at all. (b) people navigating the emigration process struggle with finding reliable, consolidated resources during the planning phase, (c) there are a lot of foreseen and unforeseen bureaucratic hurdles when dealing with government agencies and tools, and (d) there is oftentimes excessive instructional ambiguity regarding new processes and lifestyle characteristics once the emigrant is living within their newly adopted country.

## Key Terms

**Expatriate:** Short for “expatriate,” a person who lives in a foreign country with the intention of establishing long-term residency who typically take non-virtual jobs

**Digital Nomad:** A person who lives in a foreign country with the intention of short-term residency and typically take jobs that are 100% remote and 100% online

**SIE:** Acronym for “self-initiate expatriate,” an expat who goes to work in another country on their own initiative without the help of an employer

**AE:** Acronym for “assigned expatriate,” an expat who goes to work in another country and receives emigration assistance from an employer

## Hypothesis

I hypothesize that many people undergoing the emigration process struggle with time management, excessive bureaucracy, and adjusting to life in their new country.

## Literature Review

### Politically Motivated Upticks in Emigration Demand

After the 2016 Super Tuesday elections, queries about emigrating to Canada jumped by 1000% per Kyle Novak’s American Collegiate article (2016). Whether it is just knee-jerk reactions to an external event or the beginning of concerned citizen’s actual emigration process, the motivation to emigrate sees a bump every four years after a Presidential election. According to a 2019 Gallup poll covering President Trump’s years in office, the average percentage of Americans wishing to emigrate from the US rose 6% over that of Obama’s last term in office.

## **Non-Politically Affiliated Emigration Motivations**

The two main categorizations of expats are AE's (assigned expatriates) and SIE's (self-initiated expatriates). AE's and SIE's embark on the emigration experience with different levels of support to aid them and have different, but similar, reasons for leaving their homelands. Heidi Wechtler's case study states that AE's motivations for leaving include career development, personal development and financial considerations, whereas SIE's motivations include family, location, culture, and adventure (2018). Female SIE's may, per research cited in Ms. Wechtler's case study, leave because of possible gender discrimination in career advancement in their homeland, known as a push factor.

## **Previous Studies on Expats**

Whatever the impetus may be, it should be noted that little research has been done to address expatriate success over the long term. Per Brady M. Firth and Gilad Chen's case study "fewer than 5% of expatriate studies are longitudinal (2014). In fact, almost no longitudinal research has been conducted regarding expatriate experiences in the last 20 years." With little to no research existing on how well Americans are adjusting overseas, there are few benchmarks in place to prepare people wishing to live abroad for the realities of cross-cultural adaptation.

AE family's inability to adjust to their new culture has been noted as one of the main reasons that expatriate families fail. Little systematic research has been done on expat families and has mostly been focused on the employee's experiences overall. Stressors that go unchecked and unresolved can lead to increased psychological

distress, depression, increased alcohol and substance abuse, decreased physical and mental health, as well as alienation and homesickness (Sterle et al).

What is shocking is that even though there has been very little empirical research on how expat families (both individual members and families as a whole) deal with stress and the struggles of expatriate assignment, 73% of expats were accompanied by a partner (Sterle et al).

Self-initiated expatriates, who emigrate without employer relocation support, deal with challenges to international mobility through the combination of money, professional status, educational attainment, social networks, and economic resources (Doherty et al). According to another study cited within the same case study there is a SIE to AE status change phenomenon that is barely tracked and is due mostly to serendipity versus a plan like that of an AE's experience (Richardson et al). Motives to move abroad amongst SIE's varies with gender, location, and life stage, which creates different "equations of motivation (Thorn et al)."

## **Methodology and Work Plan**

### **Research Design**

This project consisted of four different phases: Planning, Research, Synthesis, and Design Suggestion. The overarching goal was to prove the hypothesis and gather suggestions from what was learned to ultimately propose a design solution that would consolidate primary resources needed for emigrants during the conception, transition, and integration phases through the application of user experience design processes.

## Activities

The Planning phase was conducted over two weeks and consisted of survey question and interview script creation, interview scheduling, and secondary research preparation.

The Research phase was spread out primarily over four weeks and consisted of desk research, user surveys, academic research, user interviews, and competitive analysis. Desk research was executed through the use of Google and all supporting articles were stored in an Excel spreadsheet. Topics considered relevant included “Where Are Americans Emigrating to and Why?”, “Counting the Uncountable: Overseas Americans,” “World’s Safest Countries,” and Canada’s Immigration website, to name a few. Building a secondary data lens to examine the who, what, where, when, and why was critical in building a case to support the thesis.

My user survey was posted on Facebook and received 47 responses. The aim was to conduct exploratory research in compiling data on three different user types: those who have emigrated, those who have done research on emigrating, and those who have never had any interest in emigrating at all. Although the design solution will be focused on Americans who are involved with one of the three emigration phases, the data obtained could be used in future iterations to provide useful data on the motivations, goals, and frustrations of additional users.

I conducted academic research using Google and the MICA Decker library and provided the backbone of the Literature Review. From the studies researched, I discovered that there are two primary user types (AE’s and SIE’s) when describing the

motivational aspects of emigrating and how there is little mental health support for expat individuals and families overseas. This supports the overall hypothesis that there remain scattered and few consolidated mental health resources for expats.

The user interviews justified the crux of the argument, which provided the primary qualitative perspective behind the research. Eleven expats were interviewed in total, compiling emigration experiences across twelve different countries and four different continents. They were asked a series of 31 different questions (with clarifying questions asked when needed) on categories ranging from demographics to foundational to emigration process, as well as current state and future state. The strategy was to ask open-ended questions that would allow the interviewees to provide their personal contexts which would either support or disprove the Thesis statement.

The competitive analysis highlighted what comparable tools are available and are categorized by direct and indirect competitors. Each digital tool's pros and cons provide context of the scattered resources that emigrants and would-be emigrants have available to them.

The Analysis & Synthesis phase lasted three weeks, whereby I analyzed the user surveys and user interviews to break down the important data elements, as in any statistics or statements supporting the Thesis. Once extracted into Aurelius (qualitative data management tool) and then Miro (online collaboration tool used for affinity maps) in the form of digital stickies, the main highlights were then arranged by categories in the form of affinity maps to build three primary categories: Personas, Features, and then User Flow. Within the Persona group, two user types were broken out: AE and SIE. Within each of those groups, their motivations, goals, and frustrations were

captured, as recorded during the interviews. The motivations group was divided again by “Push” and “Pull,” breaking down internal and external factors.

The Personas were designed in grayscale to highlight the two different user types that I interviewed and surveyed. It was critical to observe the overlapping motivations, goals, and frustrations, which give context into the “who” aspect of this research.

The Design Suggestion phase lasted one week and was focused on consolidating all of the key findings from research, as well as building the framework for the future design solution. Affinity maps were created in Miro to catalog potential features, divided up by “Core” and “Nice to Have.” Within the “Core” group, three subgroups were created for the purpose of synthesizing user priority: “Emigration Hurdles,” “Good to Know,” and “Day to Day Hurdles.” In addition to feature synthesizing, another group was created called “User Flow,” which was built to help brainstorm the user sequence for some of the additional features.

## **Limitations**

Executing and completing the research for this project definitely did come with its fair share of limitations, most of which were beyond my control to improve or fix.

### **1. Finding an Equal Number of SIE’s to AE’s for User Interviews**

Due to the short completion window for this project, finding an equal number of SIE’s (digital nomads) to AE’s (expats) for interviews became a challenge. Going into the user interview planning stage, I had not yet discovered who the true users were for this research. However, during the secondary research phase, I discovered that a

large chunk of US expatriates could be classified as a “digital nomad.” Unfortunately, I was only able to interview one.

## **2. Academic Research (Sans a Paywall) Lacking in Studies on American Expats**

Extensive research hours were spent trying to find academic studies on American expats that weren’t blocked by paywalls. My lack of a research budget made it a challenge to provide multiple secondary examples on the individual struggles that US emigrants face.

## **3. The US State Department Does Not Keep Tabs on Americans Living Overseas**

The State Department does not keep track of United States citizens living overseas. This, combined with the lack of academic study on American expats, placed more reliance for this research upon primary data from user surveys and user interviews.

# **Results**

## **User Surveys**

### **Emigration Process Difficulty**

Among those that have emigrated, 54.5% gave a 3 on a scale from 1 to 5 (5 being the most difficult) and 18.2% concluded that it was a 5, which indicates some level of difficulty in the process.

## **Process Suggestions**

When expats were asked what could be made simpler about the process, the following were called out:

- Guides on the types of bureaucracy to expect
- resources for newcomers
- the visa application process
- more visa sponsored employment search options

## **User Interviews**

### **Online Country Immigration Tools**

Expats gave mixed answers when describing whether or not online tools were simple and easy to use. It was very contextual given the circumstance of the person's emigration experience. Out of the 11 people interviewed, eight had some kind of assistance from their employers, whether it be legal or housing support. Some employers also provided how-to guides and consultants. However, even among those who received employer relocation support, a few expats mentioned having to deal with ambiguity and a lack of common processes amongst the different officials they encountered at visa offices in countries like Hungary, Germany, Thailand, and Canada.

### **Other Online Emigration Tools**

When it came time to discuss the other resources that expats used during their research process, blogs were mentioned frequently as resources, as well as Facebook groups, and expat forums. Multiple AE's spoke about how they spent a significant

amount of additional time researching with other source that were not provided to them from their employers.

### **Process Steps That Caused Stress**

Stress inducers named by both AE's and SIE's were:

- scheduling appointments with the visa office
- importing one's pets
- coordination of the many steps
- becoming adjusted to the new day to day ways of life
- uncertainty on move date due to unforeseen lag time between submitting paperwork and next step
- difficulty around trying to obtain a cell phone or daily necessities due to a language barrier.

### **3 Words to Describe the Emigration Process**

When asked for three words to describe the overall emigration process, the interviewees used "frustrating," "confusing," "stress-inducing," "bureaucratic," "veiled," "un-streamlined," and "pain in (the) ass" as examples. Whether this is a reflection on each emigrant's employer assistance program or the unescapable current state of emigrating as a whole remains to be seen.

## **Discussion**

### **Analysis + Synthesis of Research**

Given the results from the survey and interviews, three of the four assumptions (b, c, and d) were validated. The first assumption regarding user types was disproven

after user interviews were conducted, whereby the personas condensed down to two: AE's and SIE's.

The three proven assumptions were that (b) Expats interviewed had to consult far more than the Government Immigration website to conduct their research during the planning phase. They referenced a number of different blogs, forums, chat rooms as providing the necessary supplement to their research. (c) Most interviewees experienced at least one kind of bureaucratic hurdle. One interviewee even said that the German (known for organization and efficiency) visa process is still “disorganized and bureaucratic.” (d) All interviewees struggled with issues on managing certain aspects of their new day to day lives. The four expats living in Canada all struggled with navigating their newly adopted healthcare system provided that there were not any personalized resources available, which speaks volumes to the level of complexity given that all four expats had employer assistance with getting into Canada.

## **Conclusion, Implications, Recommendations**

### **Conclusion**

Given that the assumptions regarding necessary scattered resources and process ambiguity were validated, it can be concluded that the emigration process for both AE's and SIE's provides many organizational and bureaucratic challenges. AE's who received employer assistance in the management of the three main stages still struggled with multiple issues, which infers a major need for improvement to make the entire process run smoother and with less frustration.

The contextual differences of experience between AE's and SIE's undergoing these three phases ranged from goods importing ambiguity to government website navigation confusion. In order to provide remedy to the shared planning, process, and adaption issues expressed throughout this research paper, a design solution to consolidate typically researched emigration elements is in order, which would entail comparisons on cultural differences and cost of living, educational benefit allowances, breakdowns on visa and permanent resident requirements and expectations, as well as on goods importing specifics with contact details for further questions, to name just a few.

### **Implications**

Both the SIE and AE's interviewed were split on what their long-term goals were. Half said that they didn't expect to remain in their newly adopted country, but, that they were not ruling it out. Also, several that had emigrated to Canada mentioned that they were nervous about having to pass the French language exam one day to become citizens and so, therein lies opportunity for the insertion of a foreign language learning module with the design solution.

**Coronavirus Disclaimer:** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, borders all across the world were open to allow Americans to emigrate. Research was conducted prior to the American pandemic declaration and all observations and design suggestions are based on hypothetical circumstances where international travel and commerce is unrestricted. The design solution will be based on expectations for the future world of travel after the quarantines have been lifted.

## Recommendations

Provided all research and conclusions made herein, the recommendations for the app will be based around aiding the expat in planning their relocation, logistic coordination involved with relocation, as well as various expat resources for the integration phase like social connection, healthcare navigation tools, and banking suggestions. The plan is to build a customizable app that allows users to research, plan, coordinate, and connect to others wishing to embark on the journey of emigration. The next steps entail wireframing, prototyping, then user testing to develop an MVP.

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# Appendices

## Personas

### Joan an assigned expat



Age: 35  
Occupation: Digital Analyst  
Salary: \$75,000.00  
Current City: Richmond, VA  
Country of Citizenship: United States  
Education: Bachelor's

"We had been looking at relocating to either Seattle or Silicon Valley, which can be miserable if you're not making millions."

#### Bio

Joan and her husband just emigrated to Montreal from Cleveland to pursue a big career opportunity. They have been in their new country for almost 4 months now and are struggling to become adjusted. While having done their research, they found that resources were scattered and oftentimes hard to understand. Currently, they have some friends who are also looking into emigrating and are encountering a lot of the same frustrations as they did.

#### Goals

- navigate the new health care system
- better understand cultural differences & quirks
- understand how the cost of living, taxes, & public school system are different/similar

#### Motivations

Push

- distrust in American government
- student loan debt
- broken social welfare system
- life becoming too routine

Pull

- amazing new job opportunity
- sound social justice system
- universal healthcare
- better maternity leave entitlements

#### Frustrations

- cultural differences/quirks
- language barriers
- emigration process still bureaucratic, stressful, full of uncertainty
- new healthcare system is confusing
- rule changing of some processes with little transparency
- vague/unclear government websites

## Phillip a self-initiated expat



Age: 28  
Occupation: Web Content  
Salary: \$55,000.00  
Current City: Bangkok, Thailand  
Country of Citizenship: United States  
Education: some college

"One of the best hacks here in Thailand is that you can leave the day your visa expires and return the next. They will re-admit you with no questions asked!"

### Bio

Phillip is a "digital nomad" who doesn't have any near future plans of establishing new roots in any particular country. He is single and wants to visit a minimum of 5 new countries per year while working virtually since he has the flexibility. He foresees himself being an expat for at least another 5 years before he decides whether he will move back to the States or not. Due to the current political climate, he has serious doubts.

### Goals

- to know upfront how much visas cost and which ones are needed
- better understand cultural differences & quirks
- be able to access all of the travel hacks in one place
- better understand cost of living differences

### Motivations

Push

- distrust in American government
- student loan debt
- cost of living
- America's live-to-work mentality
- gun violence

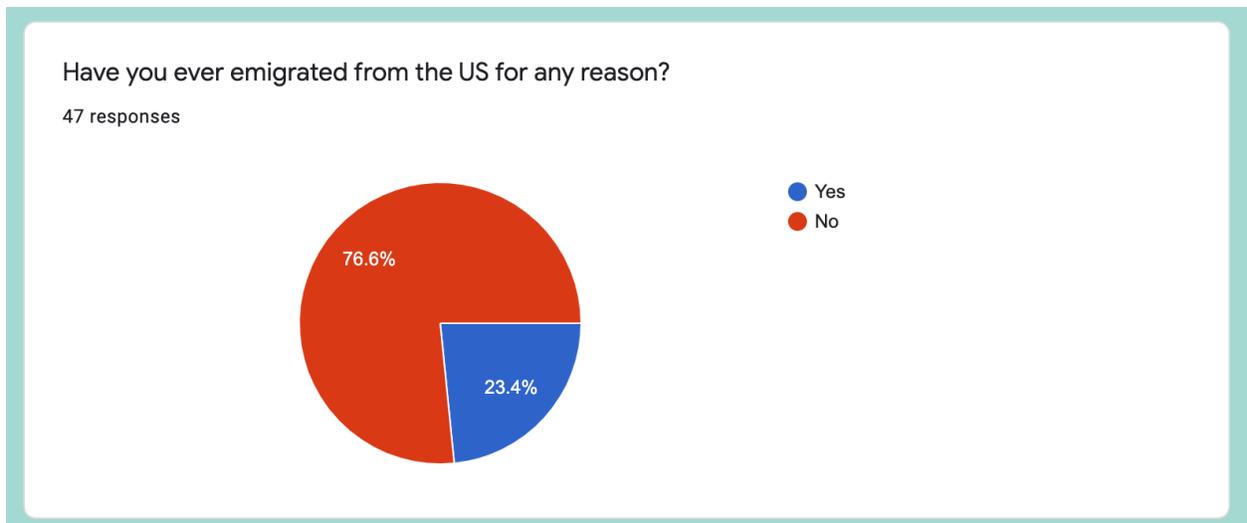
Pull

- adventure
- health/wellness
- calmer pace of life
- safety

### Frustrations

- vague/unclear government immigration websites
- language barriers
- emigration process still bureaucratic, stressful, full of uncertainty
- having to find workarounds when bringing goods or pets into certain countries
- rule changing of some processes with little transparency
- vague/unclear government websites

## Survey Results



### Why did you move there?

11 responses

My job

Part of my family was there, wanted to pursue education there

Husband's duty to the family

Job offer

For work

Work

Cyprus: family. Italy: I really like the way of life, and I found work easily

For the experience, made possible through a job opportunity

I initially went on a working holiday visa, intending to stay for just one year. I really enjoyed my community here and decided to try to stay longer...and 13 years later. I remain.

### On a scale of 1 to 5, how challenging did you find the entire emigration process?

11 responses

