



EDUCATION

THE PASSPORT TO SUCCESS

EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT OF SALES AND MARKETING AT ERIE INSURANCE GROUP, JOHN KEARNS FCII, SHARES HIS EXPERIENCE OF RELOCATING TO THE US, HIGHLIGHTS SOME OF THE DIFFERENCES IN THE INSURANCE MARKET STATESIDE AND EXPLAINS HOW NEW TECHNOLOGIES HOLD THE KEY TO ACHIEVING WORK-LIFE BALANCE.



Name:
John Kearns

Position:
Executive Vice-President of Sales and Marketing

Qualifications
Fellowship of the Chartered Insurance Institute (FCII), MBA from Dublin City University, B.S. in Computer Science from Trinity College Dublin

Company:
Erie Insurance Group

Country:
USA

How did you get started in insurance?

My uncle worked in Sun & Alliance in London and advised me that they had a good trainee programme, so I started there as an underwriting trainee – straight out of school at 17.

At the time it was expected that everyone would sit insurance exams and you wouldn't get a salary increase unless you passed them. I did three exams each year, achieving fellowship status in four years. The company provided extensive training allowing me time in all of the underwriting departments which really helped me with the academic side of things. It was a great mix of technical knowledge paired with on-the-job training.

Leaving school and heading straight into exams – was that tough?

The one thing I would say is that the top people in the industry were all ACIIs and they were all involved in the institute and that culture permeated through their organisations in a very proactive way. The people who advanced in the industry were people who had success in the insurance exams. So that was a good motivator for studying hard – although I don't know if I studied really hard. I mean I didn't just walk into an exam – I studied smart. My commitment yielded results and I won some prizes – including the Sargison for the Associateship and Fellowship. That was a big deal and got me noticed.

Was your relocation to the US planned?

No not really, the key move was after 20 years in Sun & Alliance. I was 37 and St. Paul approached me. They wanted to set up a different model, a specialty business in Ireland and other countries outside the US. When I

started, I changed the business model and said why don't we hire specialty managers. We hired product leaders rather than a line of business experts, then we hired loss control expertise, which was unique in the Irish marketplace at the time, as well as specific, specialty coverage. It worked incredibly well, and then four and a half years into that job they asked me to move to the US for a job in head office, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Did you know then that it would be a long term move?

It was a big decision, but the plan was to come back and head up international. My plan was to be based in Ireland. I told them to keep me a big office; 3–5 years and then I'd come back.

However, during those years there were some significant changes and 'international' was reduced to just Ireland, England and Canada. So suddenly there weren't the opportunities. I was on an ex-pat contract and didn't really see a way back, so I became a fully fledged US employee and committed to staying on in the US.

It was a great opportunity for the kids. They were in Montessori in Ireland so we put them into Montessori in the US for a bit of consistency. It was a great opportunity for them because now they get to see what it's like in a different country. The key to the success of the move was doing it in a positive way and being fully committed to it.

What impact do you feel your qualifications had on your relocation?

Well my qualifications were certainly recognised when I was recruited to head up St. Paul in Ireland. The FCII was the top qualification, so

putting that on the resume essentially took any education question off the table.

What are the main professional differences between Ireland and the US?

There's not a lot, I mean insurance is insurance. There are obviously different covers and different regulation of course. The US is a lot more regulated and is regulated by state. So if you operate in several states you have multiple regulatory authorities to deal with and they regulate policy wording, pricing, the company, the people, so it's much heavier on regulation.

There's little things like, they call it coverage rather than cover, auto rather than motor – so the terminology can be different and I have to retune my brain every time I come back and forth. Coverage is different but the principles are the same and they have what's called CPCU – that's the ACII equivalent certificate. So I say I have the equivalent of the CPCU (even though FCII is more significant) and people don't question it.

I guess one of the main differences in terms of business culture is that in the US, you're an employee at will, the notice period is zero. So that concentrates the mind. Now that doesn't mean that there isn't loyalty and there isn't commitment, but it's a different culture as a consequence. So if you work hard at any level, there's greater expectation, there's greater compensation the further up you go, but with that comes a more clinical environment – if a new CEO comes in, pretty much all of the senior people will leave, because the CEO will bring in their own people. Nobody gets upset, it's just business. Nobody's defensive, nobody is embarrassed, it just is what it is.

In terms of entry to the industry in the US, do most people go to 3rd level college, do business and then enter the industry?

A degree is pretty much a prerequisite in the US for any job in insurance. People can do a risk management course in college, which basically gets you a long way up the CPCU ladder and there are lots of other subsidiary exams. So the education structure is different in labelling but is similar in concept and philosophy. There is that expectation that if you're looking for advancement in an organisation, you will have demonstrated educational achievement – that commitment is important.

Tell us a bit about the lifestyle in the US – is a good work-life balance possible?

You know it's what you make of it. The notion that Americans take less vacation and they're very focused on their work is true to an extent but certainly my experience in Erie Insurance is that there's a better work-life balance than in Ireland. Technology has changed everything. People say 'you're stuck to your phone', but smartphones have freed us up so much. I can be on a golf course and call into a conference if I need to, that wasn't possible just a few years ago.

The quality of life is great, the work/life balance is what you make of it and if you're efficient, if you're smart and use technology, you can have a great lifestyle and do what you need to do in your professional role as well. What the US gives in terms of lifestyle is a much broader environment. Beaches, skiing, hiking, vibrant city life – anything you want is effectively on your doorstep because domestic air travel is so easy and competitively priced.

What are the opportunities for Irish people hoping to work in the US? Are they restricted?

If I wanted to hire someone from Ireland I could bring them over on the same visa I initially came over on (the L1). I would say to people that once you're in on whatever visa you are on, it's very easy to move up. But making that first step is the challenge.

The best route is probably through an American company; Aon, Willis, Liberty for example. If you get in and get to know the US or international management, that's your gateway. Having international experience from working in Europe is prized in many jobs in the US. It's a perspective that lots of Americans don't have so it can give candidates a competitive edge.

With your wealth of experience – both personally and professionally – what advice would you give to bright, ambitious people of any age coming in to the industry or contemplating a change of scene?

Get your exams, work hard, try to win a prize or two (joking!) and network. Get involved in the institute and get noticed. Your peers may not place much significance on it, but the reality is if you're having that success, senior people notice success. But you have to work on it, it doesn't happen automatically.



John and his son, Stephen on a trip to New York

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