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Mary Shirley
(mary.shirley@masimo.com) is the
Head of Compliance at Masimo in
Irvine, California, USA.



Adam Turteltaub
(adam.turteltaub@corporatecompliance.org)
is Chief Engagement & Strategy
Officer at SCCE & HCCA, based in
Eden Prairie, Minnesota, USA.

Meet Mary Shirley: ‘Sending the elevator back down’ for others in compliance

By Mary Shirley and Adam Turteltaub

AT: You must be the most well-traveled compliance person I have ever met. You are a New Zealander who has worked in Singapore, Hong Kong, Dubai, and both coasts of the U.S. What’s driven the travel? Is it a desire to live in different places, just going to where interesting opportunities are, or challenging yourself to do something new?

MS: In New Zealand, it’s fairly typical to do what’s colloquially referred to as an “OE,” which stands for “overseas experience.” We’re so geographically detached from the rest of the world that it makes sense to spend some time living and working elsewhere for a bit before you settle down. Most people who choose to do one tend to do this when they’re young, and it often takes place by way of a gap year between finishing high school (college, as we call it) and university (college, as you call it). I didn’t get a hankering in the same way that many of my peers did and was intent on living in Wellington my whole life. An opportunity presented itself to work in Singapore, and on a somewhat spur-of-the-moment whim—pretty unlike me—I decided to grab that opportunity without thinking too much about it. I anticipated a two-year stint there before returning home. Well, I caught the travel bug (and a few stomach bugs) along the way and now find myself in Southern California, 13 years and a few more countries along in my journey.

AT: What have you found is the same and different in all these places?

MS: Everyone, and I mean everyone, just wants to make a good life for themselves and their families. No matter what that may look like, it’s the one thing I have found that unites us across borders, cultures, and languages. We’re all just trying to survive and ideally thrive. There can be some differences when experiencing community-based versus individual societies; however, by and large, I’ve been made to feel at home and accepted into the fold everywhere, meeting lifelong friends and feeling fortunate that I’m experiencing things and meeting people I never would have had the opportunity to had I just stayed home as I initially planned. Walking among different cultures has done wonders for opening my mind, and I cannot even begin to describe how special it is to feel like you have multiple homes in this big wide world—that perhaps isn’t quite so big after all.

AT: There are often great cultural differences around the world. Did you find navigating the different cultures was difficult, or was it easier than most would expect?

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