

Cross-cultural training for the post-global world

In today's changed world, cross-cultural training just isn't enough, argues Dean Foster. What we now need is something new — global skills development training.



Organisations and individuals working across cultures have long known the value of cultural training: most companies with a presence in global markets have, either through bitter experience or wise awareness, come to appreciate the bottom-line advantages that cultural preparation provides, for the expatriate and family being assigned to a foreign location, or the global team attempting to work more effectively across time and culture zones.

Cross-cultural training is no longer considered a "nice-to-do", but for most companies with any international experience, it is recognised as an essential tool for business success.

Accordingly, the art and science of cross-cultural training has developed over the last 20 or so years, from an infant discipline to a mature management training intervention, with a body of knowledge and a training methodology all its own.

There's just one problem: most of the research, methodology and orientation that is the bread and butter of most cultural training programmes was designed in what I would call the "pre-global" world, while most organisations needing global skills training today are operating in a "post-global" world.

Most organisations working across borders today need not only the information about cultures that was researched and developed over the last 20 or so years, but more significantly require information and skills that allow them to also deal with the POST-global realities of cross-border work today.

This does not mean that what traditional cultural training has been providing up to this point is incorrect or invalid, but rather that a larger context has now developed, a bigger box in which cultural information must now be placed.

The newer issues of working in a global matrix, with certain global forces which may be more powerful than the individual cultural ones about which traditional cultural training was solely concerned, must now be addressed.

In fact, cross-cultural training, while new and important in the pre-global world, in today's post-global is suddenly not enough. Today, organisations do not require merely cross-cultural training: the post-global world requires global skills development training.

What are the differences? What are the additional benefits that global skills development training provides that picks up where traditional cultural training leaves off? Let's explore:

TCT (Traditional cultural training) for relocating expatriates and families has typically, and correctly, focused on making all members of the relocating family aware of fundamental cultural dynamics which they will experience, each in their own way, as they adjust to their new host culture.

The problem is that in today's post-global world, many individuals have lived in powerfully multi-cultural environments all their lives, define themselves and their families as multicultural, and may have had extraordinary international experiences themselves prior to even their first relocation abroad.

Most major world cities today, where many assignees have grown up and worked, are more international cities than they are representative of the majority of the population of the country that hosts those cities, and many potential assignees come to their first assignment abroad with an existing awareness of cultural differences and dynamics.

Correspondingly, there is an increasingly greater likelihood that the world into which the expatriate and their family will be moving will be more familiar than different to the world that they are leaving, both often being major multicultural international cities.

Additionally, TCT traditionally focused on this adjustment (again, in the pre-global world, correctly) as it mainly affected the non-working partner, the goal being to assist that individual most at-risk for not being able to adjust to cultural differences. And, in fact, the non-working partner, in the pre-global world, often was the most at-risk individual making the move abroad (the assignee, after all, had their *raison d'être*, but the partner often was ripped from their moorings, with no connection to the new host culture, bereft of family, friends, and in the new location solely to support the assignee).

However, in today's post-global world, over 70 percent of all expatriate families are dual-income families, and the non-assignee partner is more inclined to maintain a career (or develop a new one) than not.

Technology spawns the proliferation of networks of support that assist with adjustment and career development issues for the non-working partner, and allows for career maintenance and management anywhere in the world by circumventing any existing restrictive local employment regulations that prohibit non-assignee partners from being employed in the new country (these regulations additionally will increasingly disappear between major trade partners, as reciprocal treaties with large, supra-national regulatory bodies, such as the EU, permit partners to find work as well).

But, if TCT is primarily focused on the needs of the traditional "trailing spouse" and family, it often does so at the expense of the professional training needs of the assignee: today, over 80 percent of all international assignees have work responsibilities for multiple cultures (i.e., Ms Smith is being relocated to Paris, but she is Vice President of her company's Western European

operations), yet TCT typically addressed the cultural phenomenon one needed to be familiar with only for one's host country (in this example, only France and the issue of working with French colleagues in a French office).

If Ms Smith is not provided with important cultural information about how to work effectively with the 15 other western European countries she is responsible for, then cultural training is not doing its job.

More profoundly, in today's post-global world, most international work locations are themselves multicultural environments, and in combination with the ubiquity of global teams, spread out as they are across continents, create a total work environment for the majority of expatriates assigned abroad that are in and of themselves far more multicultural than the original culture in which they are located.

Ms Smith would be hard-pressed to succeed in work from her office in Paris, if she were only trained to work with the French, as most managers in Paris offices today are responsible for staff from cultures around the world, and global teams flung far and wide across all cultural horizons.

Finally, there is the issue that in the pre-global world, cultural training focused on, well, the culture, while in today's post-global world, global skills development must also provide awareness of how to work with "cultural change", and "global dynamics" (not merely "cultural dynamics").

Not only are cultures today different from the traditional all-too-stereotypical outlines that TCT all-too-often drew, but perhaps what is more important for global managers today to master, more important than understanding the cultural attributes of any one particular culture (or even several), is a mastery of "global behaviour", of understanding a way "to be" globally, of working with a "global mindset".

In today's post-global world, one must know how to be both effective and comfortable with any variety of cultures, and at the same time be able to deal with whatever intensity and stage of change, growth, upheaval, dislocation, synthesis or dissolution any of the myriad cultures they may be working with at any one time may be going through. And all in the service of their company's global goals.

Therefore, in order to achieve these goals, organisations need to move beyond TCT to GSD (Global Skills Development) training.

GSD does not necessarily negate or replace TCT, but enhances it by going beyond discreet cultural outlines (researched in a pre-global world), and by raising the bar beyond a mere understanding of particular cultural attributes to a measurable skill that reflects the ability to deal with global forces and supra-cultural realities.

The methodology of GSD, in addition to content, also is different: it uses the availability of technology to provide instant, on-going information and support, no matter where the expatriate and family may physically or psychically be at any point in their relocation cycle. It moves from the one-time event of TCT to on-going "process-training".

Technology, however, can never replace the value that face-to-face classroom training provides, but providers need to provide curricula that address the changing needs of expatriates and their families at the different points in their relocation cycle, and need to do so always with an awareness of the global issues – in addition to the local cultural ones – that the expatriate and their family may be dealing with.

Finally, GSD means that expatriate assignees cannot succeed if they are the only ones given this global training: the reality is that the receiving office, colleagues and associates need to understand these global issues as much as the expatriate does, and global skills development training needs to be administered to all individuals working with expatriates, and working globally, and it should ideally be administered at all major global locations, insuring a global employee population that speaks and acts with one voice.

Global Skills Development represents a paradigm shift in thinking about providing the organisation and its global managers with the skills they need for truly successful global work.

But why not a paradigm shift? The world has shifted in front of us: from an "international" to a "global", and now perhaps, a "post-global" place. It only stands to reason that the training needed to succeed in this new world also needs to shift: forward, from traditional cultural training to cutting-edge global skills development.

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