

What Is Cultural Training, And How Is It Improving Assignee Wellbeing?

For assignees overseas, adapting to new ways of working is an inevitable part of the experience. A new language, new tech, and often a whole new job role, are just some of the adjustments employees are prepared to expect when being sent on assignment. But often, it is the change in culture that presents the biggest shock.

This is why we're seeing more and more global organisations look to 'intercultural training' when planning their employee mobility programmes. You may hear the term 'intercultural training' and think of things like: knowing when to hand out business cards when conducting a meeting overseas, or how to use chopsticks when on a business lunch. But it's more than that.

It's about equipping assignees with the knowledge of different cultural norms and behaviours, in their business as well as their personal lives.

Providing support to employees – in the form of insights, understanding and awareness of new, unfamiliar cultures – has the power to relieve some of the stress of relocating, enhance employee wellbeing, and ultimately lead to a successful assignment abroad. Here, we explore what makes an effective cultural training programme, and what key elements need to be considered.

Cultural Training Isn't Surface Level

Culture is a complex concept. It evolves, grows, and develops constantly, and varies enormously all over the world.

Intercultural training must reflect this and acknowledge the nuances of different cultural norms, to help employees build the right skills to function effectively in a country that isn't their own. So, it can't be a one-size-fits-all approach or a list of 'do's' and 'don'ts'. Effective cultural training should delve deeper into the 'why's' and 'what's'.

While the more surface-level aspects of relocating abroad are useful for employees – whether that's how to tie a sari, or how to greet others with respect – these local customs are the tip of the iceberg.

Intercultural training aims to delve deep below the surface and understand what

drives people's behaviours. For example, are there different ideals surrounding social hierarchy? Do learning and problem-solving styles differ from one culture to the next? It's important to understand how a culture works, and the social structures that underpin it, in order to help employees assimilate effectively. An effective intercultural training programme will focus on these aspects in great detail and develop your employees' ability to settle into their assigned country.

Supporting The Entire Assignment Cycle

Intercultural training takes employees through the entire assignment cycle, even before they travel abroad. To ensure a successful assignment – one that meets the objectives of the business and career goals of the employee – certain tools can be used to assess whether an employee is going to be challenged in a certain location or acclimatise better in another.

Training programmes will also look at social elements of life in a new country, and everything needed to build co-worker relations, personal connections, professional networks, and even dating norms.

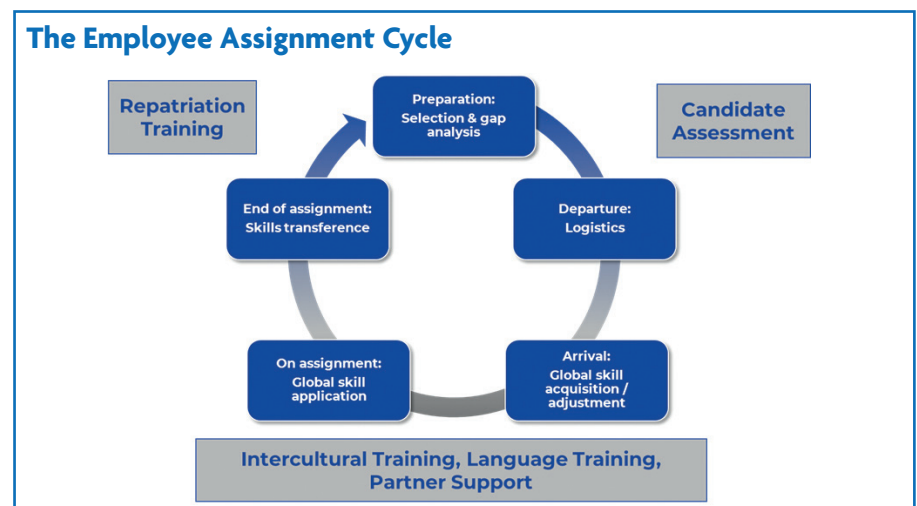
If we look at several countries within Asia, for example, relationship building in the workplace is often a social expectation, with negotiations between key stakeholders often taking place in outwardly social settings, such as lunch or drinks outing. By contrast, negotiations in the US tend to take a more transactional form, with the task

at hand being the focus of the interaction as opposed to building up those social connections. Intercultural training can build bridges across these differing social norms, equipping assignees with the knowledge of the ways in which business transactions take place in other cultures.

Similarly, when senior leaders and executives go on assignment, adapting management styles is vital, especially when co-ordinating a large team. If say, a US manager relocated to Japan without intercultural training they might not appreciate the complexity of hierarchy and value of relationships, much less the importance they have in Japanese working life.

Intercultural training builds an awareness of any unconscious biases in an individual's management style. It's not that any particular management strategy is incorrect, but it's about understanding that in different cultures, there may be more effective ways of going about things with a new team.

And to complete the cycle, intercultural training also aims to support assignees upon their return home, allowing them to repatriate with ease. While this is a lesser recognised stage in the assignment cycle, reintegration into an employee's home country is hugely important. When an employee has been immersed in a new culture for a long period of time, intercultural training can help an individual articulate to their teams back home what they have learned, and how they have grown and developed, and get back to terms with their original way of doing business.



Intercultural Training As A Wellbeing Tool

It's important for HR and mobility advisers to always keep in mind that relocation overseas can be a stressful process for employees and accompanying family members. Even grasping basic needs such as accommodation, public transport and figuring out where to buy groceries, can make navigating an unfamiliar country a mentally taxing experience. Employees are putting their lives on hold for a period of time, and it can take a while to establish a new routine, reconnect with hobbies and make friends in a new environment.

Intercultural training can ease some of these pressures, helping employees to put stress aside and focus on themselves, making it an effective tool for employee wellbeing. And it has come a long way in 20 years, increasingly integrated into company wellbeing and wellness ecosystems, as a way to support employees and assignees when they need to manage unfamiliarity. Intercultural training has moved on from theories and academic models towards real world skills that people can use immediately to help them put one foot in front of the other and know how to practically interpret situations.

Knowing how to respond appropriately is a powerful wellbeing tool, and understanding how to assimilate effectively into a new country can bring about a feeling of comfort and contribute to overall improvements in motivation and mental wellbeing. If an employee is aware of certain norms, ideologies, and behaviours ahead of their arrival, they are prepared for what is to come, and can find balance, avoid misunderstandings, and ultimately settle in more effectively.

Understanding The ROI

When intercultural training brings so many benefits to employees, businesses, and the overall assignment cycle, why is it that so many organisations choose not to implement it? It can often boil down to two factors: budgets and misconceptions.

Like many training initiatives, intercultural training programmes have the potential to be costly, particularly in large mobility programmes. As a result, some companies are not willing to pay for it, especially if the receiving manager isn't aware of the unique personal circumstances that employees must navigate as they enter into the host country. This lack of understanding around how beneficial an intercultural training programme can be, often deter managers from making the investment. They may not fully appreciate the return on investment of this training – and therefore feel the cost is not worth it – until they experience the cost of a failed or compromised assignment performance which can happen as a result of not doing it.

Similarly, another contributing factor is the lingering misconception that cultural training is academic, and not practical and relevant. Intercultural training, in fact, is all about skill building and implementing concrete actions to support employees in assimilating into a new culture. While language training, for example, has very tangible outcomes – you can either speak Mandarin to a degree, or you can't – cultural training often lacks a certain visibility that hinders organisations in seeing its worth. But in reality, intercultural training is practical, relevant, and functional – and as valuable as any career development training, improving the chance of a successful assignment, benefiting both the business and the employee.

Tailoring To Suit Individuals

Tailoring intercultural training programmes to suit the individual is key to successful outcomes. No two employees are the same, just as no two cultures are the same. It also should be recognised that when employees are at different stages of life, they also have different requirements. While there is a corporate-need objective and a personal-need objective to each cultural training programme, complexity lies within these needs and should be considered.

For example, will the employee be managing a team, or will they be in a less senior role? Depending on this, intercultural training must encompass building knowledge around different hierarchies at work and how employees are culturally expected to behave accordingly.

Will the employee be relocating as a single individual, or with a spouse? Taking this into consideration, training should cover how to build social connections in a new culture to avoid feelings of isolation in an uncertain environment.

Intercultural training programmes need to be customised and tailored to reflect the profile of the individuals being relocated, depending on their needs, requirements, and stage of life. Programmes need to include skill building and examples that are relevant to the participants so that what they learn in the training room is instantly actionable when they leave.

Final Words

Intercultural training holds significant weight for employees relocating overseas, in a professional and personal sense, helping employees to assimilate comfortably, meet business objectives, and improve their overall wellbeing as they settle into unfamiliar surroundings.

But this training in the world of work doesn't only benefit employees working overseas; it is a huge part of general learning and development. With the affordances of technology and the ability to jump

on a Zoom call with anyone around the world, workplaces have now expanded to accommodate different cultures within a team, in addition to international clients. We all work in multicultural environments to some extent, and elements of culture will always integrate into our personal and professional lives. Yet, whether at home or abroad, intercultural training at its core is about understanding, awareness and appreciation of the varying cultural behaviours across the globe. And as the world of business becomes increasingly global, this form of training will only stand to become more important for the employees of tomorrow.



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Jo Danehl has worked in the commercial training industry for over thirty years and the past twenty years have been within global mobility. In 2004, she relocated from her home country, the UK, to the USA to head up a global account management team where she worked closely with both large multinationals and smaller organisations. She has also held roles in operations and product development.

In 2013, Jo joined Crown to lead the Global Skills team and provide strategic guidance on how clients can best build global competence within their organisations and leverage cultural difference. She has spoken at a number of mobility and HR related conferences linking global skill building to operational success and has been a frequent contributor to Crown and non-Crown publications around the world.

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