

Across cultural barriers



Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich has a long-established reputation as one of Europe's leading consultants in advising people, families and kids on moving around the globe. She will be answering your questions, seeking to solve your problems and advising you on cultural differences in a regular Expatica column: Cultural Clues. Andrew McCathie talks to her about her background and her work with expats.

Why did you get into the expat business?

The Germans have this great expression: an "AHA Erlebnis", this is when the proverbial coin drops into the slot. This happened when my French expat colleagues all piled into my office with their concerns and queries. Combined with the general complaint that the person assigned to look after their interests just did not understand, relate to their issues, because they did not have the personal experience of living abroad. The type of questions all seemed to remind me of myself during my stay abroad, so here was something that was asking for some structure and research

Where are you from?

I tend to refer to myself as a mixed bag. My mother is from the UK, my father is Dutch. I grew up mainly in the Netherlands. Before moving to Germany I worked in both the UK and the Netherlands.

What motivated the move?

What can I say? I guess it was a case of boy meets girl.

How is your German?

Hah! that was a laugh. But my old German teacher would be proud of me today.

What were the challenges in making the move?

Other than the language, it was leaving everything, practically my whole life behind. It meant starting from zero again, having to reinvent yourself, build up your personal and professional network.

Where are you based?

I live in a small village in the Taunus Mountains between Frankfurt and Wiesbaden. I have a mixed relationship with my immediate "neighbours"; wild boar dig up my garden from time to time!

Could you tell us a bit about your work?

The best way to describe my work is that while the relocation company finds your house, we help the expats to make it a home. This means understanding why things work differently, what motivates people, and how to be more effective in terms of communication, relationship building, understand the German work styles, etc. We put the culture into context and answer all those unspoken questions about what makes the German tick!

What is the part that you love about your work?

There is no routine, the people and the problems vary, the corporations differ. Yes, even the destinations, everything. Plus there is always something new to learn. Being an independent intercultural trainer you have to use your creativity, and that is fun because it allows you to shape and form the training rather than just facilitate.

What are the main questions that expats ask?

Apart from complex business issues, the daily life aspects are in the forefront, such as how to make friends or wanting to know what offends and what not. I call them the do's and taboos. Many questions start with "is it true that..." so here validation is needed about things they have picked up from someone else.

What is the funniest problem you have encountered?

An expecting mum in one of our training sessions who was so relieved to find out that natural childbirth did not mean that the doctors sits on your belly and pushes the baby out, as she was told in her home country.

What has been the hardest problem you have faced?

Not only hard but also a constant problem; The "We are all the same" syndrome, "there are no cultural differences"! The expat that refuses to reflect and is driven by his or hers 'common sense' forgets that that very own common sense is culturally biased! This state of denial inhibits the cultural learning process.

You have been an expat yourself, what were the main problems you faced?

Well, what one considers as a problem says a lot about yourself as a person. In the beginning the pace of things got on my nerves, granted, I am impatient. There was also the question of the role of women in society. I realised that in certain cases (not all, please!) it worked best if I sent my husband.

What are the things you have enjoyed about moving to Germany?

Even today I marvel at the variety of the landscape, and the good food, really! A fascinating country, full of paradoxes, plenty of history and very political. So never a dull moment!

Does it become easier being an expat after you have moved around several times?

From the logistics point of view, things become easier — you know what to pack, what to leave behind, getting ready. However, each time we move we are also at a different stage of our lives, you are not the "same" person. Facing new challenges again that cannot be met by our present skill set is never easy.

Five years after she founded a relocation company in the Netherlands, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich formed an intercultural training company in Germany in 1992, CONSULTus Expatriate Briefings and Intercultural Seminars GmbH.

Based in Hofheim, Germany, the company provides pre-departure and in-country training for expatriate families throughout Europe with a particular emphasis on the needs of Fortune 500 companies.

Hilly is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is WWW.Consultus.net A regular speaker at conferences, Hilly also conducts research of the impact of relocation on families moving around the world and has introduced special workshops for spouses.

As part of supporting what she likes to call the international mobile family, Hilly has introduced a “Kids in transition program” and is the author of several books, including “When abroad – do as the local children do, Ori’s guide for young expats”, which are aimed at assisting children as well their parents to ease into new environments.

She has also launched the first website, www.Ori-and-Ricki.net, solely dedicated to expat kids and their parents.

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich reserves the right to decide which questions she considers relevant for her column. She will, however, not answer any questions dealing with tax or legal matters.

Send your questions to her at: seminars@consultus.net

