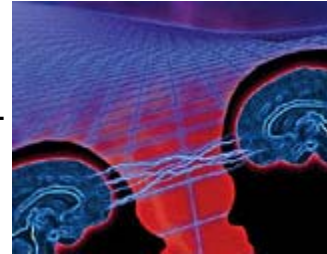


The tools are there: But how to get them used?

The challenge many HR professionals face today lies not in introducing a range of measures to develop intercultural skills, but in getting the workforce to make use of them. Intercultural trainer Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich shows how to get the message out loud and clear.



In my many discussions with corporations I notice that sensitivity for intercultural issues has resulted for the most part in the introduction of a range of measures. The corporation may offer pre-departure training, for individuals and groups, multicultural team building or cultural awareness training; and they may even include the spouses! Sometimes the programme is state of the art.

So what is the problem?

The challenge many HR professionals face today is implementing these tools. A growing number of employees are not making use of them.

When we take a closer look at what hinders the up-take of these strategic tools we see a variety of causes. Here are some ideas on how to counter this development.

1. The volatility of international business has resulted in short advance notification for pending international assignments. Fewer corporations have timelines allowing adequate preparation.

To free HR from this 'reactive position', a more strategic approach is needed. From benchmarking corporations we see that employees with high potential are identified in an earlier stage, prior to an actual assignment. These employees are included in intercultural awareness programmes, also known as cultural sensitivity programmes, wherein the foundations for intercultural competency are laid. Regardless of whether the participants will go on a foreign assignment, this training is still beneficial – especially for those employees who are frequent business travellers or members of intercultural project teams.

This modular scheme is completed by country specific trainings as an additional building block.

2. The employee has been notified about their pending foreign assignment and just simply does not have time to breathe, let alone adjust their busy schedule to the pre-arranged seminar dates.

Select your provider on their ability to offer individually scheduled seminars rather than just open but fixed group courses. Do away with the 'weekend ban', and encourage the employee to consider this as an option, (on a volunteer basis, off course). To have the trainer come to the home takes care of many potential

problems; no need to find a babysitter, no extra travel on the part of the employee and their spouse, and the employee is in the comfort of their own home.

3. The employee is already commuting between the home and the host country and has extreme time constraints to schedule a typical two-day pre-departure training.

We recommend the 'sandwich principle' - splitting the programme into a one-day pre-departure in the home country and a one-day post-arrival on location in the host country. A quality provider has a network of international partners, who deliver services in places as far apart as Tokyo, Shanghai and Buenos Aires.

4. The employee does not want an intercultural training. This reluctance may be demonstrated by statements such as, "I have been working internationally for a number of years", "International business practises are universal", "Applying common sense will do it".

Although we would prefer to see that trainings become mandatory to counter this overbearing attitude, let us remain realistic. It takes careful manoeuvring: Communicate that common sense is contextual and not neutral. Change the focus to a validation of their observations and experiences. The training offers a chance to improve their effectiveness, and a culture coach to discuss actual problems and strategies.

We know from some corporations that if the employee refuses to accept the recommended measures a mention is made in their personal file. This punitive system might backlash. Why not consider including attended training courses and seminars as part of the appraisal system. The corporation clearly communicates that they not only encourage staff to continue the learning process but that it is beneficial to their individual track record.

5. The employee would like to but there is a 'budget problem'.

This problem is 'homemade', if HR does not convince the line managers, you cannot reach the employees. HR needs to market their services more effectively, be ready to present the added value to the whole constituency. Involve the top management in formulating a covenant, a strategic paper; a common understanding that intercultural competency is part of the corporate culture.

October 2003

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