

Cross-Cultural Assignments

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn steps you can take to be better prepared for cross-cultural assignments. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Managing Cultural Differences](#)
2. [Cross-Cultural Training Through Education and Personal Experience: Low and High Rigor](#)
3. [Timing of Cross-Cultural Training](#)
4. [Adapting Behavior to the Culture](#)

1. Managing Cultural Differences

At some point in your career, you are very likely to be asked to be involved in cross-cultural operations. You may encounter employees from other countries in the local company you work for, or your company may send you to another country to run international operations. When these situations arise, you will need to be prepared to manage cultural differences. In this section, we discuss some of the things companies and individuals can do to better prepare for cross-national differences.

One of the goals of any cross-cultural training is to increase an employee's cultural intelligence. **Cultural intelligence** refers to "individuals' capabilities to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings"(Eisenberg, et al., 2013). The culturally intelligent manager is someone who can operate without difficulty in cross-national settings. Recent research suggests that cultural intelligence is made up of four dimensions:

- A *cognitive dimension*, focusing on the individual's knowledge of values and practices inherent in the new culture acquired through education and personal experiences
- A *metacognitive dimension*, which reflects an individual's ability to use cross-cultural knowledge to understand and adapt to the cultural environment they are exposed to
- A *motivational dimension*, which reflects the ability and desire to continuously learn new aspects of cultures and adapt to them

- A *behavioral dimension*, based on the ability of the individual to exhibit the appropriate forms of verbal and nonverbal behaviors when interacting with people from another culture

To give you more insights into the cultural intelligence measure, the following table provides some representative statements used to gauge a person's understanding of these four dimensions of cultural intelligence and various aspects of cross-cultural interactions.

Cultural Intelligence Statements	
Metacognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I use when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds. • I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I apply to cross-cultural interactions.
Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know the legal and economic systems of other cultures. • I know the cultural values and religious beliefs of other cultures.
Motivational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures. • I enjoy living in cultures that are unfamiliar to me.
Behavioral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I change my nonverbal behavior when a cross-cultural interaction requires it. • I alter my facial expressions when a cross-cultural interaction requires it.
<p>Source: Based on Jacob Eisenberg, Hyun-Jung Lee, Frank Bruck, Barbara Brenner, Marie-Therese Claes, Jacek Mironski and Roger Bell, "Can business schools make students culturally competent? Effects of cross-cultural management courses on cultural intelligence," <i>Academy of Management Learning and Education</i>, 2013, Vol. 12, pp. 603-621.</p>	



TERM TO KNOW

Cultural Intelligence

Refers to individuals' capabilities to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings.

2. Cross-Cultural Training Through Education and Personal Experience: Low and High Rigor

Current research suggests that cross-cultural training can influence cultural intelligence. At a basic level, you can acquire cultural intelligence by taking classes in your program. Research has shown that taking cross-cultural management courses can enhance cultural intelligence (Ramsey & Lorenz, 2016).

⇒ **EXAMPLE** In a study of 152 MBA students, researchers found that cultural intelligence of the students increased after they took a cross-cultural management course. In another longitudinal study, researchers found

that study abroad has a significant impact on the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of cultural intelligence.



THINK ABOUT IT

How do multinationals approach cross-cultural training?

The above provides examples of **low-rigor training**, in which individuals are exposed to critical information to help them understand the realities of a different culture but are not actively and directly engaged with the culture (Lenartowicz et al., 2014). In such cases, instructors transfer basic information and knowledge to students through lectures, books, and case studies.

Low-rigor training has several important disadvantages. Participants often just receive information; they learn that differences exist but do not necessarily learn how to deal with cultural differences in a real-life situation. Furthermore, cross-cultural differences can be very subtle and nuanced, and this method cannot expose participants to such nuances. Balancing these significant disadvantages is one key advantage: low-rigor training tends to be the most cost-effective.

Companies can also rely on **high-rigor training**, in which participants are actively engaged in the process and can learn some tacit aspects of cross-cultural differences (Lenartowicz et al., 2014).

⇒ **EXAMPLE** High-rigor training includes classroom language training, case studies, and sensitivity training. High-rigor training also includes more experiential approaches such as role-playing, simulations, and field experiences. Some MNCs (multinational corporations) also offer on-the-job training, during which employees are coached and trained while working at their jobs. This method allows the trainee not only to see the new culture, but also to learn how that culture interacts with the work environment.

The advantage of this method is that it enables the participant to be much more actively engaged in learning, thereby facilitating transfer of knowledge. But as you might have guessed, high-rigor training is much more expensive to provide.

Experts agree that the best method depends on the nature of the assignment. Longer and more complex international assignments benefit from higher-rigor training (Lenartowicz et al., 2014). Furthermore, because international work assignments tend to be more short-term in nature, ways to enhance the metacognitive aspects of cultural intelligence are necessary (Mor et al. 2013). Today, because more managers tend to have more frequent but shorter assignments to international companies, having metacognitive skills is critical. As a result, brief lectures or other low-rigor methods that simply provide information may be useful in helping develop the cognitive aspect but not metacognition. In such cases, high-rigor methods that allow participants to be much more actively engaged with a culture will work well.



TERMS TO KNOW

High-rigor Cross-cultural Training

Methods of training where participants are much more actively engaged in the training process and can learn some tacit aspects of cross-cultural differences.

Low-rigor Cross-cultural Training

Training where individuals are exposed to critical information to help them understand the realities of a different culture but are not actively engaged in their learning.

3. Timing of Cross-Cultural Training

Another important aspect of cross-cultural training is the timing of the training. Some multinationals offer **predeparture cross-cultural training**, which provides individuals with learning opportunities prior to their departure (Bennett et al., 2000). Such training can take the form of 1- to 12-week programs, although two- to three-day programs are also very popular. After such training, the expatriate has a good understanding of expectations, what the local culture looks and feels like, and how to manage any local shocks when they arrive. This approach also makes individuals about to go to another country less anxious about the unknown.

Multinationals will also often opt for **postarrival cross-cultural training**, which occurs after an expatriate has arrived in the foreign country and can address issues in “real time.” Armed with local cultural knowledge and training, the expatriate can delve into work issues without worrying about daily living issues.

Recent research provides evidence of the utility of cross-cultural training. For example, a recent study of 114 expatriates showed that both predeparture and postarrival training had positive effects on several aspects of their success (Wang & Tran, 2012). Specifically, in a study in Vietnam, the findings show that both predeparture and postarrival training positively impacted the ability of expatriates to adjust to their work and general environment. Additionally, such training was also effective in enhancing the ability of expatriates to better interact with locals. The researchers also examined the impact of language training. Not surprisingly, expatriates who received training in the local language were better able to adjust to local interaction than others.

The above study shows that both predeparture and postarrival training are important for success in cross-cultural management. While the study shows that it is most effective for MNCs to provide more than one type of training, the findings also show that postarrival training has the most impact on the types of cross-cultural adjustment.

While companies tend to shy away from the more expensive postarrival training, the study suggests that the investment may be worthwhile if it enables expatriates to succeed.



KEY CONCEPT

Best practices advise that the optimal time for predeparture training programs is around three to five weeks prior to the international assignment. Training provided too far ahead of time may not be very effective because the expatriate may not activate all learning readiness and may forget the training if it occurs too far ahead of the assignment. Best practices also suggest that postarrival training is best delivered 8 to 12 weeks after arrival. This allows the expatriate to experience cross-cultural interaction and phenomena and to be better ready to gain the most from the training.



TERMS TO KNOW

Predeparture Cross-cultural Training

Training provided before the expatriate has arrived at the intended destination.

Postarrival Cross-cultural Training

4. Adapting Behavior to the Culture

A final issue that managers need to address is that the training should not focus only on identifying and teaching about differences (Molinsky, 2015). Experts agree that this focus on differences is a problem in current cross-cultural training approaches. While identifying and understanding cultural differences is useful and necessary, trainers often don't provide guidance as to how the participants should adapt and react to such cultural differences. It is therefore necessary for the multinational to take the necessary steps to teach cross-cultural sojourners to adapt their behaviors so that they act and react in culturally appropriate ways. Experts also suggest that such training should not be static and limited to web pages or documentation. Training should be integrated with the actual work that the employee is engaging in.



REFLECT

1. How should training to manage cultural and regional differences occur?
2. How should training for cross-cultural assignments be implemented?



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned steps you can take to be better prepared for cross-cultural assignments. At some point in your career, you are very likely to be asked to be involved in cross-cultural operations; therefore, it is important to be prepared to **manage cultural differences**. You learned that one of the goals of any cross-cultural training is to increase an employee's cultural intelligence, which refers to individuals' capabilities to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings. Recent research suggests that cultural intelligence is made up of four dimensions: cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral. You also learned that **cross-cultural training through education and personal experience** can influence cultural intelligence. This training can take the form of **low rigor**, in which individuals are exposed to critical information to help them understand the realities of a different culture but are not actively and directly engaged with the culture, or **high rigor**, in which participants are actively engaged in the process and can learn some tacit aspects of cross-cultural differences. You also learned about the importance of the **timing of cross-cultural training**, which can be implemented predeparture and/or postarrival. Lastly, you learned training should not focus only on identifying and teaching about differences, but should also include education on **adapting behavior to the culture**.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Access for free at <https://openstax.org/books/principles-management/pages/1-introduction>

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