

Working across cultures

Global mobility requires individuals and their families to operate successfully in different cultural environments.

Changes in societal and organisational cultures require adjustment for successful assignment outcomes.

THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND CULTURE

Culture comprises basic assumptions, values, behaviours, and artefacts which together determine how people respond to their environment. Culture also determines how groups manage themselves and cope with change.

Countries all have different cultural norms which impact on everyday life and in the workplace. Societal cultures influence working practices such as leadership style, performance management, working time, work-life balance and wellbeing, and reward management. Organisations and professional groups also exhibit cultural distinctiveness.

Mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures in an international context involve bringing together different societal, organisational and professional cultures. This can lead to misunderstandings and poor operational outcomes unless cultural understanding, good communication and tolerance are in place.

Employees will need to adjust to changes in how things are done at work, within professional groups and in their everyday lives in their new society. Accompanying partners and children will also need to adapt. Children will need to adjust to different educational cultures in their new schools. Transition support is crucial for success.

CULTURE SHOCK

Moving to a new culture can result in culture shock. This affects employees' and their families' ability to function effectively. Heightened excitement, despondency and depression are all symptoms that people experience before achieving cultural adjustment.

Culture shock seriously affects wellbeing, productivity and morale. It can damage engagement and motivation and result in early return or resignation.

The effects of culture shock can be reduced and organisational and employee/family outcomes can be improved through appropriate culture shock awareness training.

In addition, international relocation policy should provide societal cultural awareness training and language training as these help employees and their families to settle in. These forms of training also aid wellbeing by reducing stress and can improve employee productivity through speeding up the adjustment period.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Employees are expected to realise business objectives speedily. However, performance management processes should recognise the time needed for cultural adjustment because during this period employees will not achieve full productivity. Performance appraisal should be tailored to the prevailing societal and organisational cultures.

REPATRIATION

Returning home after an international assignment can lead to reverse culture shock as assignees and their families experience cultural disorientation. This can lead to workplace dissatisfaction and high turnover. This results in a significant loss on investment to organisations.

Preparation and training for repatriation should address organisational and societal cultural changes. These can help to improve retention. The psychological effects of leaving the host location and reintegrating into the home country also need to be addressed.

LOCALISATION

Cultural differences need to be addressed for those settling permanently either as a result of a one-way transfer or if they remain in the host location after their assignment has been completed. Employees and their families will need to fully embrace their new 'home' country while maintaining a global mind-set to recognise the potential for future moves.

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