

Living and Working Internationally:

Who best to choose?

Any company operating from an international or global platform faces a conundrum. Is it better to choose the most technically skilled and proficient person for an international assignment or the person who may be less skilled at the core competencies of the job, but personally more adaptable, flexible and culturally curious?

Take these two examples:

Gunnar Lindberg

Gunnar Lindberg is from Finland. An IT specialist working for an international firm, he starts his new job in The Hague, the Netherlands for a period of 2 years. With him come his wife, a Doctor, and his two boys, aged nine and seven. They have been to the Netherlands on holiday once before – their first holiday abroad - where they enjoyed the buzz of Amsterdam and the quaintness of the surrounding villages. On the whole, they are excited about moving. His wife is looking forward to a break from her busy working life at the surgery and the children are hoping to see their favourite Dutch footballers in the flesh.

The beginning of their two-year period starts relatively smoothly and the excitement of a life abroad softens the blow of the culture shock they are experiencing. After a while however, irritations and confusions start creeping in. Before the move, Gunnar has been told that the Dutch are happy to speak English and have the ability to do this well. Communication is therefore not going to be a problem.

However, not knowing any Dutch, he finds he is totally reliant on his colleagues to initiate an English conversation with him. They only do this when they want him to be involved in something but switch to Dutch if the topic is considered irrelevant to Gunnar. He finds this constant switching very tiring and a little rude, even though he can understand why his colleagues feel more at ease speaking their own language. During drinks after work they try even less to involve him in a group conversation or joking banter and after a while, he stops socializing outside work altogether so as not to make anyone feel obliged to talk to him in English.

Although his technical ability to do his job is unquestionable, his place is outside the team and this has an overall negative impact on the effectiveness of the job. His host company as well as his parent company back in Finland notice this, but not knowing how to tackle the problem, take no action.

Meanwhile, his wife misses her job more than she thought she would. She discovers that she actually really enjoyed being busy with her patients and, although she likes being able to pick up her children from school and see more of them, being a Doctor is what gives her a place in the world, what defines her. Not knowing the language

and coming from a culture where people are generally not very outgoing, she finds meeting new people rather hard.

The children are making some new friends and start learning to speak Dutch but it takes a while before they feel confident enough to go to other children's houses to play. The oldest boy especially misses his friends and is behind in class. They both miss their grandma very much.

The Lindbergs don't even make it to the end of their first year. After nine months they decide to cut their losses and move back to Finland where it takes the family and Gunnar's company quite a while to pick up the pieces from a disappointing international assignment experience.

Peter de Vries

Peter de Vries is from the Netherlands. He accepts a long-term contract in the UK as a mining engineer to work in a well-known company in the South. The UK company has just merged with his employer in the Netherlands and his new role is as part of a team to facilitate the business culture alignment process to make the merger successful in the long run.

Shortly after his arrival he hires a coach because he wants someone to guide him through his first foreign assignment, which he hopes is going to be one of many to come. To this end, he requires some personal guidance through the habitual do's and don'ts of a typical British company to avoid any negative effects to his career due to cultural differences. He is keen to be seen to accept, adapt to, and interact with the British way of life.

Outside his working life Peter is steadily getting used to everyday living in the UK. He stops being surprised by the trickle that the British call a shower in a room that in Holland would be the living room: flowery wall paper and carpet on the bathroom floor. He accepts that for a return ticket for the train he takes to work, there are actually two tickets - one for getting there, one for coming back - rather than one that can be used both ways. He appreciates the general friendliness of people in shops and at work and learns to say 'thank you' when someone enquires after his health.

He starts being asked to come to the pub after work, where he has luke-warm beer in pint glasses but has so far managed to resist the temptation of pork scratchings. On a few occasions he has been invited to a colleague's Sunday lunch at her family home. Eating is never before 3 pm and the food is hot. Invariably, the meal consists of a meat roast with a selection of vegetables and an oven-made fruit dish for desert. Very different to the bread-based lunch every day of the week that Peter is used to.

At work, he finds he has to bite his tongue a lot, often re-writing his emails to use less direct language that includes 'pleases' and 'thank yous' in every other sentence. He is still mildly irritated by how long it takes to set a date for a next meeting only for it to be cancelled a few times. His colleagues cannot seem to get to the point and bring up various things that seem unimportant. Yet at the same time, when things are complex and require an intellectual debate, his British colleagues use the word 'academic' meaning 'irrelevant' to dismiss the issue. Peter also knows that he is often considered arrogant and very determined by people at work.

On the whole though, Peter is doing very well. His employer was right to send him abroad. Peter enjoys the challenge of living and working in a different culture. He has made his international assignment a success and his company knows it was worth the investment.

But how did they know this?

In contrast to the unhappy outcome of Gunnar Lindberg, how did Peter's employers realise that despite his irritation with the eternal late-running of trains, he would be quick to understand the importance of queuing, actively embrace soggy chips and appreciate the drama in the theatre otherwise known as the British Parliament? Are there certain characteristics in a person that are more suited to living in a culture that is not one's own? Is there such a thing as a global mindset?

Unfortunately, companies frequently fail to do their homework and don't consider it necessary to undertake a thorough selection process or preparation of the assignee as part of the effective management of an international assignment. Inappropriate leadership or team working, poor decision-making processes, emotional exhaustion and early termination can be the costly consequences.

What are International Competencies?

Dr Alastair Macfarlane from specialist management consultancy PSi, has identified four major areas of performance on which he believes businesses should focus to predict success in an international assignment: global orientation: personal resilience, personal balance, and inter-personal qualities. In each of these areas he has defined a set of behavioural competencies that the ideal candidate for an international assignment should possess.

"It should be obvious that there is no point sending someone abroad who cannot part with his lager and bacon and eggs or someone who is easily offended by the absence of a 'thank you'. You have got to have an open mind and be willing to engage with your new culture", says Macfarlane.

"The main problem is that companies focus too much, or solely, on the individual's technical ability and not enough on areas like cultural empathy, adaptability, performing under stress, self-sufficiency, self-knowledge and the ability to build cross-cultural relationships. To most companies these areas are too fuzzy, not measurable in performance, not quantifiable in terms of costs and therefore irrelevant."

"However, if the assignment fails or ends prematurely, there is a very measurable loss to the company. Moreover, these areas *are* now measurable, both in predicting success and in return of investment and businesses are beginning to take them more seriously."

For companies with a genuine global mindset, there are a number of professional organisations prepared to carry out psychometric tests on prospective assignees willing to take the international plunge. However doing a test should not be the only way in which assessment takes place. "Humans are complex, and it would be absurd to analyse an employee's future and prospective business success solely on the results of a questionnaire. Psychometric tests can only be of value within a process that

incorporates a variety of assessment methods – and includes the whole family where necessary. However, what is critical is to be clear about what we are trying to measure and that’s why the international competencies are so important,” concludes Macfarlane.

Living and working abroad is not everyone’s cup of tea, but with the right guidance and preparation businesses can make wiser choices and provide greater ongoing support to their long-range workers. By doing so they will avoid the costly and frustrating fallout that results from the current reported failure rates for overseas assignments.

Dr Alastair Macfarlane is a founder and director of P*Si* Ltd, a specialist consultancy that advises companies before, during, and after international assignments on a range of topics, including assessment and selection, international team working and leadership and knowledge transfer. He can be contacted at am@psilimited.com or see www.psilimited.com for more information.