

## Cross-cultural training : How much difference does it really make?

By Gretchen Lang

**VIENNA**— Before moving abroad, Alecia Myers and her husband Ken drove to Chicago to attend a daylong cross-cultural training seminar designed to teach them how to understand and relate to people from foreign cultures. There they learned about high context and low context cultures, sub-cultures, and co-cultures, the seven dimensions of culture, and increasing intercultural business competency. One year later, happily settled in Austria, Alecia looks back favorably on her cross-cultural training and tries to remember what she learned.

"The thing I most remember is Austrians are like coconuts and Americans are like peaches," she says smiling.

Cross-cultural and intercultural training, a marginal idea 30 years ago, has boomed into mainstream acceptance in the past 10 years with international businesses tapping into a large and sometimes expensive array of cross and intercultural training programs for their outgoing expat employees.

Supporters of cross-cultural training, and there are many, say that it eases the stresses of relocation, wards off culture shock and smoothes cross-cultural business relations.

But even some intercultural professionals warn that the field is still unregulated and that trainers come from a wide variety of backgrounds. There are also those who question whether expats can really learn to communicate effectively with people of other cultures in one day.

Done well, expats say, cross-cultural training makes their moves easier, especially when it focuses on practical information about their host country. Done poorly, they add, it's a waste of money and time.

The study of global differences, once the province of social scientists and anthropologists, has made increasing inroads into the business community. According to the 2001 Global Relocation Trends Survey by GMAC Global Relocation Services, National Foreign Trade Council and SHRM Global Forum, 69 percent of the 150 companies that responded offered cultural training for their outbound employees, up 10 percent in one year and almost 50 percent in 20 years.

International human resource managers are now deluged with materials advertising cross-cultural training seminars, videotapes, CDs, workbooks and Web sites. The number of vendors is estimated at more than a thousand worldwide, ranging from housewives with a few years experience abroad to academics with doctorates in "intercultural studies." In recent years, big companies like Berlitz and Prudential have added intercultural service divisions.

Fortune 500 companies now routinely purchase one- or two-day seminars at a typical cost of around \$5,000 for an expat family. Some highly sought-after trainers can make \$25,000 a day

"This is more of a necessity [for overseas business] now rather than an esoteric luxury," says Janet Bennet, executive director of the International Communication Institute (ICI) in Portland, Oregon, and one of the early pioneers of the intercultural movement.

Intercultural training is no longer just for expats. It can be used in schools and in offices, anywhere that people from diverse cultures live and work together, Bennet points out. Training can be tailored for business people seeking to better understand their foreign colleges and clients or for the expat family seeking to set up home in a foreign land.

In its pure form, Bennet says, intercultural training seeks to teach people "the knowledge, skill and motivation to communicate effectively and appropriately in a wide variety of cultural contexts."

But most intercultural trainers working with overseas assignees take the more pragmatic "cross-cultural" approach, combining practical information about the assigned country with comparisons to the home country. While clients are happy to have some intercultural communication theory mixed in, most say they want specific information about the culture they are about to enter and that they are most pleased with that aspect of the program.

"Culture specific is what they want," Bennet says, "and I don't blame them."

Academics in the field complain that unless handled sensitively, such comparisons end up promoting cultural stereotypes like the peach and the coconut.

But even interculturalist experts admit that overseas assignees can not be expected to master effective intercultural communication in one weekend.

Barbara Schaetti, an interculturalist with a doctorate in intercultural conflict resolution from the Union Institute at the University of Cincinnati, says that the value of "pre-departure" training is limited and suggests followup training after the move overseas.

"Pre-departure training works to an extent but even the best can only go so far," Schaetti says. "Even the best is hampered by the fact that it is pre-departure. It's too short, too cross-cultural, too comparative."

While this training may not teach workers or their families to communicate effectively in all foreign cultures, several studies suggest it boosts confidence and can contribute to the success of an expat assignment.

The Global Relocation Trends survey, partially sponsored by Global Relocation Services, reported that 80 percent of companies responding found that training had a great or high value in terms of the success of expatriate assignments.

Another survey of British expatriates conducted by Professor Christopher Brewster and Juana Pickard of the Cranfield Institute of Technology in England found that almost all of the respondents were very positive about the training they had received.

Alecia Myers, who trained with Cendant Mobility Intercultural Services, added that while cross-cultural training did not solve all her adjustment problems, it "calmed my nerves" as she prepared to go abroad for the first time.

"It was very helpful and I felt it was worth it even though I was pressed for time," she says. "It doesn't make everything perfect when you get there, but you're not as shocked."

Myers added that she found information and history about her host country along with discussions of culture shock to be the most helpful aspect of the program.

While cross-cultural training is expensive for companies, some are finding that a failed overseas assignment is even costlier.

"It costs us from \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year for us to keep a family abroad," says Carl Burke, manager of Human Resource Global Services at Guidant Corp. "When you look at it like that, \$5,000 is only a drop in the bucket."

Increased demand for cross-cultural training has led to more sophisticated training programs, but it has also caused some adverse changes in the industry, interculturalists say. In the 1980's, training was usually offered by individuals or small consultancy groups.

Now many of these small businesses have been bought out by larger relocation firms. Trainers worry that these larger groups do not always take into account the individual needs of the client.

Martina Nelson, a German national whose family moved from Spain to the Philippines in 2000, said her one-day training seminar in Manila failed because the trainer geared her talk exclusively toward Americans.

"It was all oriented toward what an American expat would want to know," she recalled. "There was no one there who could understand what a European would want."

Experts in the intercultural field acknowledge that the industry is still largely unregulated and companies and individuals wishing to buy these services should proceed with caution when choosing a trainer.

Gary M. Wederspahn, in his book entitled "Intercultural Services: A Worldwide Buyers Guide and Source book," notes that "there is not yet a firmly established or generally recognized course of professional development for interculturalists."

For this reason trainers seem to come from a vast range of backgrounds: teachers, missionaries, aid workers, international business people, sociologists, social workers, students — virtually anyone who has lived and worked abroad. Most are expected to speak at least one foreign language. Many companies which offer these services now require that their trainers have completed some kind of intercultural training course.

In recent years, more trainers are completing doctorate programs giving them a base in intercultural communication theory, but Wederspahn points out that successful trainers could just as easily be expat spouses who have good on the ground experience.

"Having a particular professional or academic history is neither an asset nor a liability in the intercultural profession," he notes. "Talented and competent practitioners come from all of these different backgrounds."

It is important to pick a style which suits the client, he says. Some providers will have a training team that mixes trainers with different backgrounds. All should have extensive on the ground experience in the assignment country.\*\*

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