

This article examines the role played by cultural intelligence in achieving results in international settings. Cultural intelligence involves development in three interconnected dimensions: affective, cognitive and behavioural. For example, we need to be able to manage within ourselves common uncomfortable emotions (such as frustration), accurately interpret other cultures' norms and, finally, deploy the right strategy at the right time to secure the outcome we want. All this requires us to have some degree of 'cultural intelligence'. Without this capacity, organizational goals are jeopardized. In contrast, building depth in these domains enables us to lead and manage effectively in the culturally complex situations that have become an increasingly common feature of business and professional life these days. The article outlines some of the core ideas in the field, through recent research findings, a questionnaire and several short case studies. Organizations are urged to prepare ahead if they wish to succeed.

Questionnaire

How well do you think you would adapt to living or working in another culture?

Rate yourself on your responses to the following statements. Use a scale of one to five to decide how strongly you agree with each statement, where 'one' is strong disagreement ('This statement doesn't at all describe how I see myself') and 'five' is very strong agreement ('This statement is an accurate description of how I see myself').

Make a note of your score. Later, we'll see how you can interpret it.

1. I observe the body language of others and try to understand their moods and attitudes.
2. I'm resourceful when things go wrong and I can keep an optimistic outlook.
3. I know what's genuinely important to me in life.
4. I accept that I'm not always right. I make mistakes but I try to learn from them.

International skills in high demand

In today's globalised economy, it has become difficult to find an organisation that doesn't conduct at least some of its business across national boundaries. Our world has become increasingly interdependent. As a result, cross-cultural skills are now regarded as an indispensable asset and there is a growing demand for people who can work successfully with others from different cultures.

But what makes some people highly effective, while others seem to struggle, perform poorly and even cut short an assignment to return home?

The cost of failure

The answer seems to be the individual's ability to adapt to a situation where their familiar ways of operating don't produce the same results.

For some, this experience is so disorienting and personally threatening that they withdraw. Recent figures show that one in seven UK managers and nearly 40 per cent of their US counterparts fail on international assignments. Australian research suggests a similar picture. Clearly, there are huge financial costs involved in such failures.

But the problem for organisations isn't just the cost of withdrawing someone who needs to come home. It's also the financial loss involved when someone who is barely coping limps on to the end of their assignment. US research suggests that between 30 to 50 per cent of international managers who see out their assignments are ineffective or only marginally effective. This 'expatriate failure', as it's often termed, is directly attributable to difficulties that executives (and their families) experience in adjusting to a new and often very different environment.

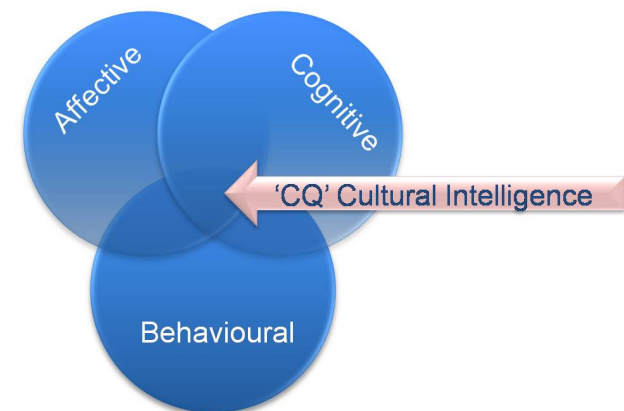
Preparation is the key to success

It's often assumed that someone who is a high performing manager at home will also be a top performer in another culture. This isn't the case. It's unfortunately true that most Australian organisations continue to base their selection decisions on professional competence alone, and don't invest in pre-departure briefings. A recent survey revealed that only 63 percent of Australian companies offered cultural preparation and, in most cases, this support was so minimal, or of such variable quality, that its usefulness was extremely questionable!

Yet proper preparation makes all the difference and a crucial part of this is understanding what's involved in the adjustment process itself. Better cultural adaptation and, therefore, increased performance and productivity have been shown to be the outcomes of sound preparation.

Operating internationally should be personally and financially rewarding both for individuals and the organizations they represent. When people are able to adapt to a new society, they have acquired the foundation for what is increasingly termed 'cultural intelligence'. They can then reap the personal and professional benefits that come from a more inclusive and integrated worldview.

As you can see from the diagram, there are three interdependent attributes that work together in the culturally intelligent person. The first is affective. This means managing yourself in positive ways that will support your success. For instance, optimistic, resilient people tend to fare better when out of their cultural comfort zone, and open-minded people tend to create more rapport than those who cannot manage their own biases or prejudices.



The second dimension is cognitive. This concerns learning about the cultures and societies where you want to do business. What values are prioritized and why? How do these preferences influence behaviour in common business and professional situations? The third dimension is behavioural. This is about building a repertoire of skills appropriate to the situations you will most likely encounter, from simpler social settings to highly complex negotiations or leadership challenges.

What's at the heart of the challenge?

When someone moves to another culture, they discover that their taken-for-granted assumptions about people and life suddenly don't apply. The new environment seems to be driven by a different set of values and rules. They can no longer be sure what other people's words, tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures and customs mean. Read the following example and see if you can figure out what's gone wrong.

Mark Gibson had recently arrived in China to work with counterparts on a climate change impact study. He has been contracted to help set up a social and economic assessment procedure. Mark is committed to the principle of community participation and is known for his skills in facilitating group decision-making.

But in his first meeting with his new project team, things didn't go too well. After introducing the topic and the agenda, there was complete silence. He couldn't get any discussion going. Finally, in desperation Mark put a proposal on the table. It was immediately accepted and the meeting broke up soon after.

Even something as apparently simple as running a meeting can be disconcerting in another culture!

What's going on?

You were right if you guessed that Mark and his new Chinese colleagues seem to have different ideas about what should happen in a meeting. They don't share the same script.

How speaking turns are to be taken in a meeting and what constitutes an appropriate agenda are part of the script people unconsciously bring to this everyday event. They assume that others from a different cultural background do things the same way. Mark needs to find out as soon as possible what are the key elements of the Chinese meeting script so that he can build a productive working relationship with his colleagues.

So what exactly is a script?

It's essentially a predetermined sequence that helps us to predict what will be involved in a common activity. As we grow up, we gradually acquire an extensive repertoire of social and work-related scripts. For instance, when we're invited to dinner with friends or go to a job interview we know what we should do and say and what would be appropriate to the situation.

Scripts reduce stress, confirm social norms and promote effectiveness by highlighting the strategies that are going to best suit the situation. Meanings can be implied rather than fully spelt out, and we can feel confident that we're interpreting others and being interpreted by them in an accurate way.

The trouble is that scripts vary across cultures! We can find that our familiar scripts don't work in the new culture and so everyday routines suddenly become stressful and confusing. Even something small can feel like an insurmountable obstacle. Nothing happens quite as we expect!

The loss of the familiar and the expected can provoke an intense stress reaction, often called 'culture shock'. We pride ourselves on our social and professional competence but suddenly we feel ineffective and helpless.

There can be physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach pains, diarrhoea, constant fatigue, insomnia and rashes. Emotionally we can feel vulnerable, anxious, impatient, depressed, irritable with everyone and even regress to childish outbursts of rudeness or temper at times.

Unable to fully understand what's going on, people can develop irrational views and negative stereotypes. The locals are deliberately rude and unhelpful! They're attempting to deceive and exploit us at every turn!

In this state, a person's ability to perform effectively is seriously compromised. They may seek to withdraw as much as they can and even block initiatives which would help, such as learning the language.

All the familiar reference points that provide a sense of identity seem to be torn away. Researchers who have studied unprepared and unsupported international managers have even described the culture shock experience as a contemporary form of medieval ordeal, out of which a manager might hope to emerge unbowed but not unbloody!

Stages or a cycle?

Earlier views of the adjustment process described particular stages that people were said to move through on the way to their goal of acculturation into the new society.

1. Honeymoon stage: the new culture is experienced as enjoyable, even a bit exotic.
2. Hostility stage: the culture shock phase when discomfort is at its peak.
3. Humour stage: enough of the ground rules have been learned to operate fairly well and be able to laugh at mistakes.
4. Home stage: acceptance, integration and effective performance.

However, recent research has challenged the notion of progressive stages as overly simplistic and not supported by large-scale studies. For instance, many people never experience any kind of honeymoon stage; some feel less comfortable the longer the assignment continues; others again report a regular sense of 'going back to square one' as the old stress reactions return. The most up-to-date view is that the process is a more complex cycle of elation and depression than had earlier been realised.

The best analogy for the process seems to be the distress reaction that tends to accompany any major change that disrupts the pattern of our lives. Reflecting on how you coped in such situations can provide some clues about your ability to adapt to a new culture.

What are some stressful life transitions that you've faced? Have you personally experienced this sort of challenge? What did you learn about your resilience and adaptability? Some critical life events which involve massive change and personal upheaval are:

- leaving home
- the end of an important relationship
- starting a new job – or losing your job
- serious illness
- moving to a new city – or even to a new country
- bereavement

Disruptive transitions are always stressful. We face the loss of something familiar in which we had, to some degree, invested our individual identity.

Coping with any of the events on your list involves some similar things: learning appropriate behaviours to fit the new circumstances; unlearning some old assumptions that no longer fit; expanding your scripts; managing stress and distressing emotions.

Emerging on the other side, if all goes well, we can find ourselves altered, with a renewed sense of confidence and competence.

Now it's time to look again at your score on the questionnaire. Do you have the personal attributes that research studies suggest assist adaptability?

Your answers to the five questions

Return to the score you recorded when you completed the five questions at the beginning of this article. The questions reflect four key dimensions of cultural adaptability that have been found to correlate with effectiveness, both in international assignments and in working within Australia with people from other cultural backgrounds. Our knowledge about what personal qualities and skills it takes to succeed on an international assignment is growing and has substantial support from research studies. The focus of these particular questions is on the personal attributes that suggest a person may be well suited to international work

Here are the four dimensions. Do you think you might be stronger on some dimensions than on others?

1. Perceptiveness

Perceptive people notice others' needs and concerns. They are empathetic and aware of different perspectives.

2. Resilience

This includes the ability to take obstacles in your stride and bounce back from failures. It relates to self-confidence and a sense of self-worth. Resilient people maintain an optimistic outlook and have a positive self-image.

3. Self-knowledge

This includes being aware of your own values, preferences and feelings, as well as having an accurate assessment of your strengths and weaknesses.

4. Flexibility

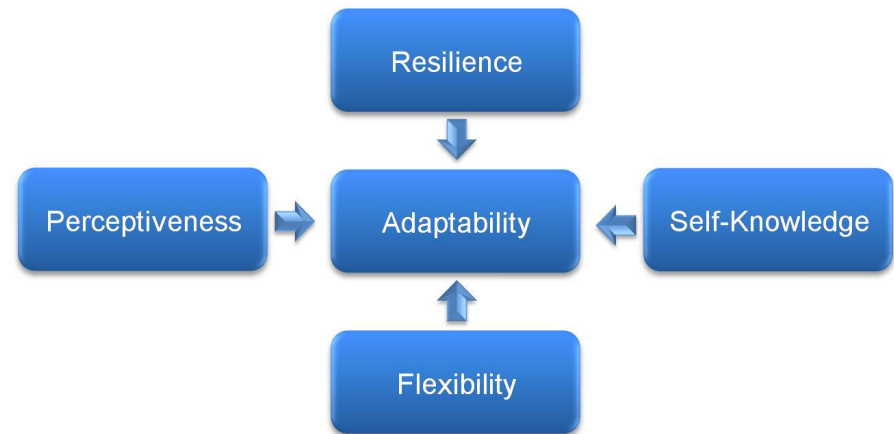
Flexible people can adapt to changing situations and have an openness towards life. They aren't afraid of the new or different but relish these as enrichments.

If your score was low on the dimension of Perceptiveness, you could practise noticing other people's non-verbal signals when you're having a conversation. If you know the person well, you could share with them the impression you've formed. Their feedback will help you check your accuracy and improve even more.

If your score was low on the dimension of Resilience, what could you do to improve? Well, you could notice your thoughts and feelings, when you're in an unfamiliar situation or when something goes wrong. What do you tell yourself at such times? Practise choosing positive and useful things that encourage you to feel resourceful.

If your score was low on the dimension of Self-knowledge, you could spend some time alone, reflecting on what's important to you in your life and what your values and beliefs are. Consider those times in your past when you've felt most truly yourself and any occasions when the opposite was true. What can you learn from these times? Your sense of self-worth is increased by behaving according to your values.

If your score was low on the dimension of Flexibility, you could deliberately seek out and spend some time with people you wouldn't usually interact with. You could do this both socially and at work. Try to find three things that you genuinely like about such a person and also one or two ways in which you might even be quite similar!



Dimensions of Cultural Adaptability

Now have a look at this case study where an Australian needed to be perceptive and adaptable.

Jim Ritchie was pleased to be told he could now see Anwar Meguid, the trade official he needed to liaise with on his first business trip to Egypt. He had been in the reception room for some time. He was ushered in and felt a little surprised to notice that five or six other people were sitting in the room already. He assumed they were part of Anwar's team. Perhaps there was more interest in Jim's company than he'd realised.

What happened next was extremely disconcerting. Phones rang and were answered. Long conversations took place. People came in and out with documents to be signed. Each time Jim began to explain his company's plans, there seemed to be another interruption, causing him to stop. He found himself becoming angry and decided Anwar was deliberately being as rude as possible.

Jim expected privacy and undivided attention! But many cultures have a different attitude to time than the one favoured in Australia. Conducting a meeting this way is common practice (except with officials at the highest level) in many countries in the Middle East and Jim shouldn't have read anything personal into it.

If he'd been calm enough to pay close attention, he might have observed that everyone was treated in a similar fashion and that courteous behaviour was actually maintained despite all the comings and goings. This might have alerted him to the possibility that the explanation for the unusual meeting style was unlikely to be rudeness.

Adjustments are needed

Adapting to another culture means more than just acquiring information, although this is always helpful. We need to go beyond learning about the new culture's ways to accepting their validity for this other group. Remember, all the knowledge we gain will not altogether eliminate feelings of frustration, annoyance or values under siege.

Adaptation means coming to terms with the new culture in our own way. This is inevitably personal because what constitutes an obstacle will depend on our own perception. For instance, the new language isn't an obstacle to those who can speak it well. Life in a small community in a collectivist culture may not be as stressful for someone who grew up in a large family or in a rural area. Initial feelings of incompetence are harder to manage for those who have a tendency to be perfectionists.

Thinking about the sort of person will help you to identify the types of situations and experiences that might present a particular challenge to your ability to adjust when working overseas. For instance, how do you tend to react when you're faced with an obstacle? Do frustration and a sense of incompetence motivate you to learn or cause you to withdraw? Without learning some specific skills, adaptation can be very tough.

In the following case study, what do you think Kathy needs to learn?

Kathy Bond represents an international publishing company, wishing to establish their business in China. She's come to Shanghai to negotiate a JV with a Chinese group who might act as her company's agents on the ground. At the point in the discussion, where the financial arrangements were raised, Fiona proposed a starting price to get things moving. But her counterpart, Zang Dai Wei just looked solemn and said nothing at all. Fiona lowered her price, making a significant concession to the Chinese.

You were right if you felt Kathy would benefit from learning more about silence: what it can mean in many Asian cultures and how to manage it.

Australians tend to feel uncomfortable with any silence longer than one or two seconds and rush to fill it by speaking again. Silence is taken as a sign of trouble. But in many Asian cultures a pause can show serious consideration and respect. An instant response, in contrast, might suggest an impetuous person – someone not regarded as a suitable business partner.

Kathy wrongly interpreted the silence as displeasure and lowered the price. Mr Zang must have been pleased at his good luck!

Conclusion

Overall, the experience working internationally can be evaluated very positively by those who have completed an assignment. They speak of feeling more confident and resourceful. They have learned how to be flexible and tolerant. They can handle quite significant responsibility and get along with people who are very different from themselves, often in demanding circumstances. They've broadened their perspective through learning about another society first hand and discovered that they can manage an important life transition and grow in the process. With the right preparation and support, this could be you too!

Each of us is different. We have different personalities and life histories. So it isn't surprising that we won't all respond to the well-documented challenges of working in another culture in the same way. What might be frustrating for me could be fascinating for you! So knowing yourself is always the best starting point. This includes self-insight into your own cultural background and the cultural 'baggage' you will inevitably carry with you into any new experience.

The next area for your inquiry needs to be learning about the complex ways culture influences behaviour. This will help you understand the reasons behind the preferences and priorities in the target culture and reduce the sense of confusion that is known to produce a strong stress response. As you find yourself increasingly able to interpret events around you accurately, so your comfort in the new society will increase. You'll be able to add 'cultural intelligence' to your portfolio of professional skills and find yourself in increasing demand in today's interdependent, globalised economy.