

# **“Congratulations On Your New Job! Have You Got Your Passport?”**

## **THE CASE FOR INTERCULTURAL ONBOARDING™**

by Jacki Nicholas

*If you're facing a new life in a new culture, country or region, get onboard with greater intercultural savvy to speed up the journey ...from landing to take off... and soften any turbulence along the way.*

According to experts, starting a new job and relocating to a new country are widely recognised as two of life's Top 10 stressors. Yet, with relocations and cross-country recruitment, many executives and professionals are experiencing these major stressors simultaneously, and often with little or superficial support.

For most people who find themselves in this situation, the first three to twelve months are 'make or break' – for themselves, both as individuals and professionals, and, if they have one, for their immediate family. This is typically a challenging time with plenty of opportunities for mistakes and growth – and usually in that order! Many employers, and often the individuals themselves, underestimate the severity of dislocation and the complexity of the InterCultural OnBoarding™ process.

The probability of relocation failure has, in some cases, been cited as over 60%. This means that “less than 40% of expatriates succeed in their missions abroad.”<sup>1</sup> A significant number of professional workers are repatriated before the scheduled end of their assignments and “up to 50 per cent of expatriates who remain in their positions until the end of their assignments operate at a low level of effectiveness.”<sup>2</sup>

Because of the high stakes and in order to internally develop their global leaders of the

future, many companies tend to select their best performing and highest potential staff for critical international assignments. Gone are the days when organizations sent their 'riff raff' to offshore postings to keep them out of sight, out of mind. These days, these postings are usually seen as lynch pins in the organisation's future strategic and leadership success.

All too often, however, companies assume that, because someone has been a top performer in their 'home' country, they will automatically thrive and succeed in their new environment, with just a cultural briefing session to orient them, followed by a bit of personal trial and error to iron out a few teething problems. In other words, despite good intentions, their top talent (and their families) are pretty much thrown to the lions. This is one of the vestiges of organisations which retain a 'head office', 'colonial' or 'paternalistic' way of thinking that underestimates the important two-way nature of successful intercultural relationships, rather than those adopting a truly global mindset.

Research and anecdotes alike indicate that little, ad hoc or superficial assimilation assistance is just not enough and, in fact, represents a major business risk. This is especially true for pivotal roles such as regional CEOs, country managers, senior management teams, business and function heads, anyone client or market facing, or who influences or makes decisions that affect the external face or the internal climate of the organisation.

The statistics are clear. Organisations should not underestimate “the risk of employee derailment typically connected with international

---

<sup>1</sup> *Relocating Abroad: A High Stakes Venture*  
Lionel Laroche - ITAP International 2004  
<sup>2</sup> *A Review of Cross-Cultural Training Effectiveness* JS Black & M Mendenhall  
*Academy of Management Review* 1990

*“Congratulations on your new job! Have you got your passport?”*  
**The Case for Intercultural OnBoarding™**

---

assignments; high expatriate attrition rates associated with a variety of job-and family-related factors result in significant losses of high-potential talent and negative financial return for the global enterprise.”<sup>3</sup>

While it's appropriate and, indeed, critical for someone in a new culture to explore and try out their own ways of handling the new situations they encounter, they shouldn't have to do this alone, without experienced, quality support as a sounding board and reality check.

The good news is that, although newcomers often feel clumsy, foolish or isolated, they are far from being alone! Challenging situations that executives, managers and professionals arriving in a new culture, country or region tend to face, at one time or another, are actually fairly predictable. These may include:

- Under-estimating the impact of 'culture shock' and dislocation, even in countries not considered 'hardship postings'
- Applying what made one successful 'at home' in their new work environment – and being surprised by achieving less success
- Managing a complex team from diverse cultures and backgrounds who aren't operating with sufficient interpersonal understanding, cohesion and leverage
- Managing teams or projects with people from different locations in a distributed, 'virtual' operating environment that exaggerates communication challenges and conflict
- Heavy travel schedules that only allow for limited, fragmented time in each location, leading to superficial connections and inadequate relationships with clients, staff and other key stakeholders; as well as putting a strain on personal and family life
- Crucial business relationships or initiatives that look OK on the surface but are inexplicably going nowhere
- Deals that appeared to be progressing well but derail seemingly at the last moment

---

<sup>3</sup> *The New Global Assignment: Developing and Retaining Future Leaders of the Global Enterprise*  
Corporate Leadership Council - March 2000

- Losing a major client or contract because important cultural and relationship issues were violated
- Not recognizing, understanding or handling partner and family challenges – leading to personal problems that strain or damage family
- Assuming that because one worked previously in a diverse, multicultural workforce in their home country, that they are adequately equipped to connect with and deal effectively with these cultures in their 'own' cultural environments.

Exciting and challenging? Yes. Easy and quick to master? No. Experience suggests that most difficulties with business deals, projects, clients, joint ventures, bosses, peers and staff are due to misunderstanding in interpersonal communications and relationship building across cultures. Profits and productivity suffer; deals and clients are lost; bosses are disappointed; colleagues are distanced; staff become disenfranchised; personal relationships are damaged; families are fragmented ... and even top talent can be derailed.

While everyone has their own timing and path to realising intercultural adaptation and savvy, the overall pattern to this process is somewhat predictable. InterCultural OnBoarding™, while tailored to the specific individual, is built around the following recognised transitional periods:

**Stage I: Honeymoon Period:** (*Approximately Months 1-2*):

This is an optimistic and high energy time when people think 'how exciting!' but often underestimate departure and arrival pressures, along with the complexity of assimilation. Interactions are usually based on 'home' patterns, good intentions, following one's instinct and trying out simplistic, stereotypical cultural 'Do's and Don'ts'. Fortunately, most staff, peers, clients and new acquaintances excuse mishaps and mistakes and put them down to inexperience or naivety. It is during this period that organizations typically provide cultural briefings to provide helpful information and increase the employee's understanding of their new and host culture.

*“Congratulations on your new job! Have you got your passport?”*  
**The Case for Intercultural OnBoarding™**

---

**Stage II: Disorientation & Oscillation**  
*(Approximately Months 2-4):*

This is a critical period as you turn the corner and 'both sides' start to live with the new reality. The exhilaration of initial impressions and sense of adventure may give way to 'Culture Shock' as they start to go about the everyday business of working and living in a different culture. By now, the individual has a more accurate picture of the complexity of the change they are facing ... and, like a pendulum, may oscillate between being exhilarated by the challenges' to thinking 'What on earth have I taken on?' There may be feelings of loss for who and what has been left 'back home' and a sense of disorientation stemming from not yet belonging in the new environment. Accompanying partners and children may start experiencing and expressing their own personal challenges, frustrations and homesickness. There may be times where the person feels alienated and forms or expresses negative stereotypes as a coping mechanism to explain adjustment difficulties. At the same time, staff, peers and clients start to stop 'forgiving' and start forming opinions - potentially long lasting ones. This can be a period when it feels like being in 'no-man's land', conjuring up feelings of confusion, frustration, longing, and wanting to fit in, peppered with positive experiences that provide a sense of hope and affirmation.

**Stage III: Experimentation & Adjustment**  
*(Approximately Months 3-9):*

This is a time of purposeful experimentation and conscious adaptation strategies. It is a 'make or break' period as signs of real progress and interpersonal success are needed for the sanity and confidence of the individual, their family and the organisation. It is an active growth period when the individual knows enough to start making a difference and forge positive relationships. Lessons learned from active trial and error are paramount here. Without positive progress and real wins, self-doubt and despondency can set in, as to whether or not the individual (and family) can 'make it' through. It is still OK to make some mistakes but these must be quickly recognised, acted upon and openly acknowledged as learning lessons, both personally and, at times, publicly.

**Stage IV: Consolidation & Integration**  
*(Approximately Months 6-12)*

This is a time when new skills, behaviours and styles become increasingly 'natural' and part of the individual's everyday repertoire. This often includes subtle or even major shifts in personal values, mindset and philosophies. These changes can be positive or maladaptive. During this period ongoing frustration, 'digging in' to retain 'old' ways, interpersonal estrangement (either at work or home) and even misplaced arrogance can murmur or erupt - either situationally or more enduringly. Lacklustre performance from usual star performers may also occur but go unnoticed or tolerated, without providing productive interventions.

Traditional orientation services are extremely useful in helping people settle into their new culture or country and find their way around in the first month or so. What most relocated workers crave for, however, is just-in-time, long lasting, relevant assimilation assistance, tailored specifically to their unique needs. InterCultural OnBoarding™ coaching services provide this missing link and are designed to provide individuals with a 1-1 personalised resource to assist their navigation through these critical periods. This can be expanded, as needed or desired, to include others such as family members and key stakeholders in the organisation to also help them understand what is happening and consider what personal or professional adjustments they could make.

Typical benefits individuals gain from the InterCultural OnBoarding™ and the coaching partnership it entails include:

- Recommendations, checklists, tools and discussions for approaching the first three to six months in the new culture, country or region (eg: NewCulture100™ and NewCulture200™)
- Awareness of personal and professional orientations that can typically be expected of the specific cultures the individual is working with - without erroneous, simplistic stereotyping
- Greater InterCultural Savvy that combines increased self-awareness, understanding of others and mechanisms for diagnosing and connecting

“Congratulations on your new job! Have you got your passport?”

### **The Case for Intercultural OnBoarding™**

- Practical guidelines for basic 'Do's and Don'ts' when dealing with particular cultures and cultural orientations
- A sounding board for asking those 'embarrassing' questions people feel they should have the answers to
- A realisation that 'culture' is learned and all individuals have their own unique profile based on their background, experiences and free will
- A grasp of simple, practical frameworks for understanding their own and other people's cultural orientations, preferences and styles
- Clarity as to their own cultural profile and communication preferences to serve as the base from which they view the world and operate personally. An understanding of how these influence their own behaviour and impact on interactions with others form the foundation for effective communications and relationships
- Identification and exploration of the specific situations the individual is involved in. By working through their actual work scenarios and challenges, the underlying 'why' is uncovered to get to the heart of the presenting issue;
- Specific goals that address the core issues the individual is committed to addressing;
- Practical strategies to apply in real work situations and critical relationships;
- Increased ability to work sensitively and effectively with others, while retaining their own personal style and authenticity.
- Today's workforce (and society's) demographics are more complex and hybrid than ever before. There is rarely any such thing as 'pure' culture anymore, except perhaps in the most remote pockets of the world. These days it's quite possible to find yourself working in Singapore with a Malaysian who...has a Chinese father and a Portuguese mother ...who was educated in the United Kingdom ...who has lived in Australia and mainland China...who has worked for French and Japanese companies and ...who is married to a Brazilian. Each of these cultural inputs (and other factors) is likely to have influenced the individual and their cultural profile, communication preferences, team approach and leadership style. Yet if meeting this person, people might

make assumptions about them from their own beliefs about a 'typical Malay'. It is also important to understand that an individual who has never left their home country, while likely to have had many predictable cultural influences, will have unique values, behaviours and influences that make them who they are – both in line with and contrary to their 'expected' cultural profile.

InterCultural OnBoarding™ is a highly tailored executive coaching service that sits at the crossroads of intercultural savvy, interpersonal connectivity, team effectiveness and leadership. Coaching can be provided on either a 1-1 or group basis. It works to minimise naive stereotyping that can prevent true interpersonal connection or result in poor interactions and damaged relationships. Cultural profiles and personality profiling are valuable tools that help us interpret and frame our interactions, experiences and responses with people. These tools and personal insights act as navigation instruments, rather than straight-jackets. By better understanding their own and other's behaviour, values and operating styles – both related to and irrespective of their apparent culture - they become more effective in building connecting relationships in diverse intercultural contexts. This and achieves 'win-win' business and personal outcomes, and saves tremendous financial and personal costs related to expatriate burnout and fallout.

© 2005 InsideOut Consulting Pte Ltd

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

**Jacki Nicholas** is Managing Director of InsideOut Consulting Pte Ltd, a company devoted to enhancing the success of organisations, teams & leaders by building high performance behaviours "from the inside out". For further discussion on the topic of InterCultural OnBoarding™, please email [jacki@insideout-consulting.com](mailto:jacki@insideout-consulting.com)