Cultural Awareness Training Methods- A Mixed Bag

By Rebecca Minor, MAOC, BBus

Cultural awareness training for expatriates is becoming more and more important as global communities become increasingly interconnected and dependent upon one another. Expatriate workforces and their families as part of their external contract are expected to help bridge the cultural gap on behalf of their companies and home countries in the global marketplace.

I remember growing up and hearing news of one of my more adventures cousins moving overseas for work, and the spirited discussions that followed which seemed to go on for weeks. At the time it looked as though everyone had an opinion on the topic and how strange it would be to live over “there”. I learned quickly, that the decision on whether or not to break away from the security and familiarity of one’s home and move overseas to live the life of an expatriate can be a daunting one.

However, it didn’t deter me either (myself being an Australian living away from home for almost 20 years) but I have learned a few lessons during my travels that have made moving abroad easier and one of the biggest is just like any significant change in one’s life the more you prepare, the better off you will be...

My introduction to expatriate living started shortly after getting married, when I moved from Australia to Greece with my husband, who was assigned there with the military. I vividly recall the excitement but also sheer anxiety that set in at Athens airport because we knew relatively nothing about Greece prior to our arrival other than what we read in travel brochures and saw on television. As luck...
would have it for me, Greece was a relatively easy culture to adjust to and having other expats nearby helped me a lot in those early days.

Fortunately, times have changed a lot since then as now days we have access to hundreds of webpages containing traveler’s blogs, cultural awareness & language training, expat support groups and general awareness sites can be accessed long before getting on the plane. In the almost 20 years since Greece, the methods for cultural awareness training that I’ve experienced and gained the most from include...

- Pre-move packages supplemented with internet research
- Assignment of a sponsor who is experienced in the new location
- A brief familiarization brief with a guided tour
- An in-depth familiarization course over several days covering numerous topics

Letting an expatriate relocate to a new country without providing any cultural training, may save the company or sponsor resources in the short term. However, this method can be vulnerable to generating a higher potential for negative outcomes and early return of employee and or family. Indeed, the incident that stands out the most for me in which an expatriate had arrived with no cultural awareness training occurred in the Middle East about two years ago. A neighbor of mine, despite my best efforts to tell her otherwise, insisted that it was “ok” for her to go out to the store with me wearing a spaghetti strapped shirt and short skirt during Ramadan. This is a particularly devout time for Muslims and would be akin to wearing beach getup to Easter Sunday Mass. Needless to say, there were many a displeased looks directed at us, along with an air of general discomfort felt by locals and even myself, since I was walking around with her watching the annoyance build on people’s faces. She ended up leaving the Middle East to return to her home country a full year earlier than her husband. So, perhaps her cultural missteps and ultimately her early departure could have been avoided, had she received
training on the customs associated with this holy time and how to avoid making cultural faux pas or missteps.

In my experience, receiving a pre-move package accompanied by online research can go a long ways in helping set one’s mind at ease and help prepare for a move overseas. In the case of moving to Japan several years ago, I was already able to introduce myself, count to twenty in Japanese and easily convert dollars into yen prior to landing at Narita Airport, thanks to this type of cultural awareness training. Indeed, these seemingly minor details, went a long way in providing me confidence that I could live and even thrive in Japan! I also found that my stress level was lowered considerably by reading the materials provided in my pre-move package and in conducting research online on topics that I found particularly interesting or peculiar. Items such as subway and street maps, shopping options and restaurant recommendations were all available to view in English prior to my arrival to my new host country.

The use of an assigned sponsor as a cultural awareness training method has been a bit of a mixed bag in my travels. As a newly arrived expatriate, being provided with an individual sponsor to help sort through the many facets of the transition and assimilation into the new culture is quite convenient. However, at times because the sponsor gives personal pre-move packing advice, introduces the newcomer to one’s favorite shops, restaurants and recommended places to look for housing, the biased advice may not be in sync with one’s own plans. The instance when having a sponsor was the most comforting was upon arrival to Greece, when our sponsor clearly showed her enthusiasm and love for
Greek culture, food and the local people. She would beam with excitement as she would watch you taste new food, look at a glass sculpture in a store or learn to speak the new language. The times when I have encountered an unenthused or unengaged sponsor have been the times when I have had the longest, most difficult adjustments to the new country and culture as a whole.

A short familiarization brief with a guided culture tour, offers a multi-level learning approach which can give a lot of insight in a short period of time. Another advantage of this method is that it can be tailored for specialized groups and timelines as needed. Occasionally this method can feel rushed and leave some feeling the material given doesn’t go into enough detail but overall it’s a very cost effective method to get out essential information. One of the most rewarding experiences of this method I found was in the Middle East, where after a half day introduction to Arab culture and language, we were taken on a tour to see a local mosque, museum, camel farm, a visit to the Souq and finally dinner at a traditional Arabic restaurant. Although the introduction was brief, my comfort level within the region grew significantly that day because I could go home that evening and email my friends and family about all the interesting things I was exposed to that day.

Area familiarization briefs which are accompanied by, an orientation lecture series and generally scheduled over a one week or so are a substantial undertaking for both the provider and the recipient. This cultural awareness training method often depends on delivery of multiple in-depth briefings, which are conducted by specialists on various culturally relevant topics and can make use of multi-level learning approaches. The problem I found in participating in this method during the welcome week in Japan was
that, I along with many others, were very jet lagged. So, when some lecture segments were long-winded or the speaker was not very skilled in presenting, they would lose my attention or in some cases, the message of the brief would get lost on me. That being said, out of all the cultural awareness methods discussed today, I found that this one gave me the strongest start to an expatriate transition than any other, simply because of the wide array of information we were given over the whole week and the ability for me to come back the following day and ask for clarification on questions I had come up with the evening before while trying to explore my new home.

In conclusion, even though each method discussed above has obvious benefits and drawbacks to use within the expatriate cultural awareness training environment. I have found that no one method is the right pick for every situation. In my experience a multi-pronged approach to cultural awareness training gives the incoming expat the best shot at getting off on the right foot. It is my belief that the most appealing methods of providing cultural awareness training to expatriates, is to use a combination of pre-move packages and online research, sponsorship, combined with a familiarization brief & tour. These three methods when used together provide multiple layers of cultural awareness training, and maximizes the chance that newly assigned expatriate (and family) will have a satisfying and effective adjustment to life abroad.

Image: Minor, Rebecca. “Royal Camel Farm, Manama”. 2013. JPEG
Rebecca Minor, is co-editor of our newsletter. Rebecca has been an active member of the ISODC since 2012. Originally from Australia, Rebecca is a citizen of the world, having lived in many countries. Nowadays, her most important job title is mom to her one year old son, Rex.