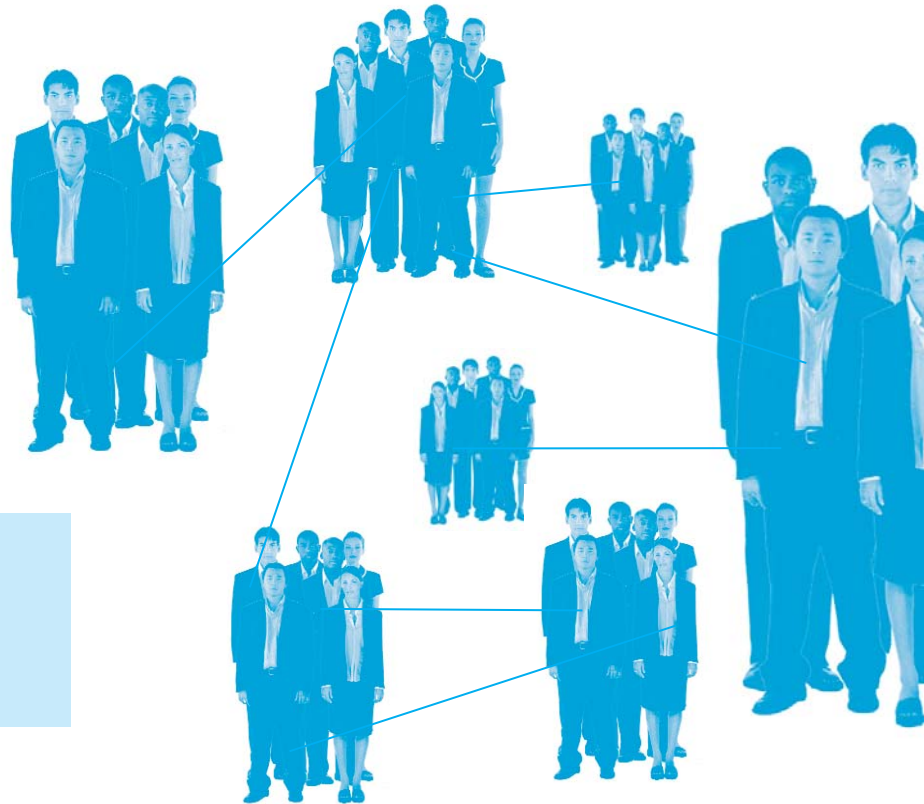




Intercultural Skills

A guide to working with other cultures



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Appreciating that individuals from different cultural backgrounds have different cultural norms, practices and expectations is vital for success in international business. Although companies all around the world seem to move closer to common practices and appear to become more alike each day, differences in the way we think or act profoundly influence business interactions.

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shaking your head means “no” in most countries,
but “yes” in Bulgaria.

About this guide

Appreciating that individuals from different cultural backgrounds have different cultural norms, practices and expectations is vital for success in international business. Although companies all around the world seem to move closer to common practices and appear to become more alike each day, differences in the way we think or act profoundly influence business interactions. People and companies may have certain similarities on the surface, but our upbringing, our education and training in ways of conducting business, the basis for our judgements and behaviour, all vary - not only from country to country, but from region to region, from small company to large company, from one business sector to another. When there was relatively limited contact, and contacts were confined to a small number of individuals, cultural awareness was the preserve of a few. In today's world of global communications, team empowerment, everyone needs some level of cultural awareness.

This guide:

- gives a definition of intercultural skills;
- explains in which business interactions intercultural skills are most commonly needed;
- sets out how to acquire those skills;
- provides information on different kinds of intercultural training;
- signposts to useful organisations and sites.

What are intercultural skills?

People see the world through their own set of assumptions and attitudes, through their own “cultural spectacles”. For example, culture influences the way we deal with people and the way we solve problems. At the most fundamental level, each individual’s interpretation of the world is different, but according to the groups to which we belong (national, regional, local, professional, family) we share some interpretations with others.

Culture can, for instance, be defined as: **a system of beliefs and values shared by a particular group of people.**

‘Culture’ means that we and others will expect conformity to certain patterns of behaviour as a consequence of the groups we are perceived to belong to.

As culture influences every aspect of our lives - from the way we dress to the way we do business - we need to develop certain attitudes and skills to become successful global players, in our own country or abroad. These skills will enable us to interact both effectively and in a way that is acceptable to others when working in a group whose members have different cultural backgrounds.



the Urdu language, used and understood by many people from Pakistan and India, uses the same word for yesterday and tomorrow: Kal!

Depending on the type of interaction, you will need a range of skills¹, among them:

- tolerance of ambiguity;
- behavioural flexibility;
- communicative awareness;
- knowledge discovery;
- respect for otherness;
- empathy.

Tolerance of ambiguity The ability to accept lack of clarity and to be able to deal with ambiguous situations constructively.

Behavioural flexibility The ability to adapt your own behaviour to different requirements and situations.

Communicative awareness The ability to identify and use communicative conventions of people from other cultural backgrounds and to modify your own forms of expression correspondingly.

Knowledge discovery The ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and to use that knowledge in real-time communication and interaction.

Respect for otherness Curiosity and openness, as well as a readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about your own.

Empathy The ability to understand intuitively what other people think and how they feel in given situations.

¹ Copyright INCA, LdVII, 2004 (see ‘Where to go next’)

Where are intercultural skills needed?

At a corporate level

At a corporate level, intercultural skills are required in every line of business and during every interaction. Cultural differences influence everything from the formulation of a company's mission statement and the way international subsidiaries are managed, to the rules and regulations set out for employees, the processes for negotiation of business deals or the preparation of marketing strategies. Global managers and workforces need intercultural skills both in face-to-face interaction and in virtual communication with people from other cultures, in their own country, abroad and in international teams. Intercultural skills are indispensable for effective management of a diverse workforce.

Liverpool Water Witch

The news that China was tightening up its anti-pollution laws was just the incentive the company needed to embark on a new export campaign. But, as export manager, Jackie Caddick, was well aware, knowing where to start was the difficult part.

“There was no point going over to China unprepared,” she explains. “What we needed, before we even considered a proactive sales campaign, was some professionally translated promotional material and a thorough understanding of Chinese business ethos.”

The cultural briefing sessions Managing Director Joe Caddick received in the months leading up to the visit certainly weren't wasted. “Much of my success in China depended on non-verbal communication to break the ice. It was the little things that really made the difference over there - like making sure I presented my business cards Chinese side up, with both hands, not one. Those were the kind of tips that paid dividends when it came to establishing trust and respect.”

At a personal level

Many business practices and ways of dealing with colleagues and business partners which work successfully in your 'home' culture might not be appropriate in another country or another culture. 'At home' you have a pretty good understanding of what is right and wrong and what you should or shouldn't do. But when dealing outside your 'home' culture it is not always easy to determine what is acceptable behaviour. You have to be prepared to work outside your comfort zone and to consider adjusting your behaviour to what you see and experience around you.



when the Japanese are trying to listen carefully to what is being said, they sometimes close their eyes and appear to be sleeping.

Case study

Alphasonics (UCS) Ltd

“Employing foreign distributors is one thing, but we wanted to prove to prospective customers that we were making the effort to communicate in their language. After all, what’s the point in trying to trade internationally without respect for other countries’ language and culture?”

“When in Rome Do as the Romans Do.”

Imagine you are spending two working days in your sister company in the Netherlands:

- How do you address people?
- Which language should you use? If the answer is English, is your English, with its local variations and your personal phrasing, understood?
- How does a different religion influence co-operation (holidays, customs, food, etc.)?
- Whom should you talk to first? Is there a hierarchy you have to take into consideration to get the job done effectively?
- How much responsibility do your colleagues take?
- Should you talk to individual employees or to a team or a group of people?
- Should you send an e-mail, talk to your partner on the phone or pay them a visit?
- Is it acceptable if you use jokes, for instance in your presentations, or do you have to act in a very serious manner?

How are intercultural skills acquired?

Every time you deal with people from other cultures in an open way, in your own country or abroad, your intercultural skills will improve. You can consciously contribute to this process by:

- reflecting on your own culture (the spectacles through which you see and judge the world);
- learning a foreign language;
- meeting people from other cultures and being prepared to learn about their different systems of values, norms and behaviour;
- attending intercultural training courses.

Intercultural training falls into two main categories:

- culture-specific;
- culture-general.

Choose culture-specific training when you have to deal with a limited number of cultures, e.g. as a preparation for negotiations, before starting co-operation, for international assignments or as a teambuilding measure for bicultural teams.

Choose culture-general training when you have to deal with many different cultures in different situations. This will give you an overview of cultural differences and how to deal with them.

Interactive training provides a good start to improving intercultural competences! Intercultural competence is not only about knowing, but about doing, doing the right things at the right time!

The business case

What is the pay-off from improving your intercultural skills?

Take the following example: One of your employees will spend two years abroad on an international assignment. Intercultural training which prepares them and their family for living and working in the other culture will cost the company between one and two thirds of this employee's monthly salary, depending on the duration of the training and the employee's salary. Consider, if their expatriation fails due to problems in adjusting to the new culture the total costs related to this failure could amount to between three and five times their annual salary.

Take international teams: If you invest time and money in intercultural teambuilding measures at the beginning, the team will interact effectively right from the start, which will save time and money in the long run.

Or in the case of international projects: you start to co-operate with a company from abroad and do not expect any problems in times of globalisation and with English as the language of international business. And yet, after six months it seems that nothing has been achieved; your partner seems to have another understanding of deadlines, priorities and the way your co-operation should work. You could have saved half a year's time (and money) if you had prepared properly for this co-operation.

How to select a trainer or a training company

Quality criteria for trainers or training companies are their certifications and qualifications, years of experience and list of references. In the case of culture-specific trainers make sure that your trainer is a native of the respective culture or has spent several years living and working there recently.

Cultural briefing sessions may vary between 3 hours (half a day), 6 hours (1 day) or 12 hours (2 days), according to need.



in Arab countries you should be careful when admiring an object in your host's house: you might be the recipient of it!

Where to go next

BLIS Professionals A quality-assured on-line database of language and cultural experts, maintained by CILT, the National Centre for Languages. www.blis.org.uk/professionals

INCA A Leonardo Da Vinci funded project co-ordinated by CILT, the National Centre for Languages which developed a portfolio of intercultural competence, a framework of intercultural competence and a partly computerised model for a suite of assessment tools. www.incaproject.org

SIETAR Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research, the world's largest interdisciplinary network for students and professionals working in the field of intercultural communication. www.sietar.org

Solvit

A site offering information, advice and solutions for the challenges of international communications. www.solvit.org.uk



two French people sitting in a café, talking, will touch each other approx. 110 times in one hour, two English people won't touch each other at all.

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