

## 1.2.7: The International Assignment

### Learning Objectives

1. Describe how to prepare for an international assignment.
2. Discuss the acculturation process as an expatriate.
3. Describe effective strategies for living and working abroad.

Suppose you have the opportunity to work or study in a foreign country. You may find the prospect of an international assignment intriguing, challenging, or even frightening; indeed, most professionals employed abroad will tell you they pass through all three stages at some point during the assignment. They may also share their sense of adjustment, even embrace of their host culture, and the challenges of reintegration into their native country.

An international assignment, whether as a student or a career professional, requires work and preparation, and should be given the time and consideration of any major life change. When you lose a loved one, it takes time to come to terms with the loss. When someone you love is diagnosed with a serious illness, the news may take some time to sink in. When a new baby enters your family, a period of adjustment is predictable and prolonged. All these major life changes can stress an individual beyond their capacity to adjust. Similarly, in order to be a successful “expat,” or expatriate, one needs to prepare mentally and physically for the change.

International business assignments are a reflection of increased global trade, and as trade decreases, they may become an expensive luxury. As technology allows for instant face-to-face communication, and group collaboration on documents via cloud computing and storage, the need for physical travel may be reduced. But regardless of whether your assignment involves relocation abroad, supervision of managers in another country at a distance, or supervision by a foreign manager, you will need to learn more about the language, culture, and customs that are not your own. You will need to compare and contrast, and seek experiences that lend insight, in order to communicate more effectively.

An efficient, effective manager in any country is desirable, but one with international experience even more so. You will represent your company and they will represent you, including a considerable financial investment, either by your employer (in the case of a professional assignment) or by whoever is financing your education (in the case of studying abroad). That investment should not be taken lightly. As many as 40 percent of foreign-assigned employees terminate their assignments early (Tu, H. and Sullivan, S., 1994), at a considerable cost to their employers. Of those that remain, almost 50 percent are less than effective (Tu, H. and Sullivan, S., 1994).

### Preparation

With this perspective in mind, let’s discuss how to prepare for the international assignment and strategies to make you a more effective professional as a stranger in a strange land. First we’ll dispel a couple of myths associated with an idealized or romantic view of living abroad. Next we’ll examine traits and skills of the successful expatriate. Finally, we’ll examine culture shock and the acculturation process.

Your experience with other cultures may have come firsthand, but for most, a foreign location like Paris is an idea formed from exposure to images via the mass media. Paris may be known for its art, as a place for lovers, or as a great place to buy bread. But if you have only ever known about a place through the lens of a camera, you have only seen the portraits designed and portrayed by others. You will lack the multidimensional view of one who lives and works in Paris, and even if you are aware of its history, its economic development, or its recent changes, these are all academic observations until the moment of experience.

That is not to say that research does not form a solid foundation in preparation for an international assignment, but it does reinforce the distinction between a media-fabricated ideal and real life. Awareness of this difference is an important step as you prepare yourself for life in a foreign culture.

If the decision is yours to make, take your time. If others are involved, and family is a consideration, you should take even more care with this important decision. Residence abroad requires some knowledge of the language, an ability to adapt, and an interest in learning about different cultures. If family members are not a part of the decision, or lack the language skills or interest, the assignment may prove overwhelming and lead to failure. Sixty-four percent of expatriate respondents who terminated their assignment early indicated that family concerns were the primary reason (Contreras, C. D., 2009).

Points to consider include the following:

- How flexible are you?
- Do you need everything spelled out or can you go with the flow?
- Can you adapt to new ways of doing business?
- Are you interested in the host culture and willing to dedicate the time and put forth the effort to learn more about it?
- What has been your experience to date working with people from distinct cultures?
- What are your language skills at present, and are you interested in learning a new language?
- Is your family supportive of the assignment?
- How will it affect your children's education? Your spouse's career? Your career?
- Will this assignment benefit your family?
- How long are you willing to commit to the assignment?
- What resources are available to help you prepare, move, and adjust?
- Can you stand being out of the loop, even if you are in daily written and oral communication with the home office?
- What is your relationship with your employer, and can it withstand the anticipated stress and tension that will result as not everything goes according to plan?
- Is the cultural framework of your assignment similar to—or unlike—your own, and how ready are you to adapt to differences in such areas as time horizon, masculinity versus femininity, or direct versus indirect styles of communication?

This list of questions could continue, and feel free to add your own as you explore the idea of an international assignment. An international assignment is not like a domestic move or reassignment. Within the same country, even if there are significantly different local customs in place, similar rules, laws, and ways of doing business are present. In a foreign country, you will lose those familiar traditions and institutions and have to learn many new ways of accomplishing your given tasks. What once took a five-minute phone call may now take a dozen meetings and a month to achieve, and that may cause you some frustration. It may also cause your employer frustration as you try to communicate how things are done locally, and why results are not immediate, as they lack even your limited understanding of your current context. Your relationship with your employer will experience stress, and your ability to communicate your situation will require tact and finesse.

Successful expatriates are adaptable, open to learning new languages, cultures, and skilled at finding common ground for communication. Rather than responding with frustration, they learn the new customs and find the advantage to get the job done. They form relationships and are not afraid to ask for help when it is warranted or required. They feel secure in their place as explorer, and understand that mistakes are a given, even as they are unpredictable. Being a stranger is no easy task, but they welcome the challenge with energy and enthusiasm.

## Acculturation Process

Acculturation, or the transition to living abroad, is often described as an emotional rollercoaster. Steven Rhinesmith provides ten steps that show the process of acculturation, including culture shock, that you may experience:

1. Initial anxiety
2. Initial elation
3. Initial culture shock
4. Superficial adjustment
5. Depression-frustration
6. Acceptance of host culture
7. Return anxiety
8. Return elation
9. Reentry shock
10. Reintegration

Humans fear the unknown, and even if your tolerance for uncertainty is high, you may experience a degree of anxiety in anticipation of your arrival. At first the “honeymoon” period is observed, with a sense of elation at all the newfound wonders. You may adjust superficially at first, learning where to get familiar foods or new ways to meet your basic needs. As you live in the new culture, divergence will become a trend and you'll notice many things that frustrate you. You won't anticipate the need for two hours at a bank for a transaction that once took five minutes, or could be handled over the Internet, and find that businesses close during midday, preventing you from accomplishing your goals. At this stage, you will feel that living in this new culture is simply

exhausting. Many expats advise that this is the time to tough it out—if you give in to the temptation to make a visit back home, you will only prolong your difficult adjustment.

Over time, if you persevere, you will come to accept and adjust to your host culture, and learn how to accomplish your goals with less frustration and ease. You may come to appreciate several cultural values or traits and come to embrace some aspects of your host culture. At some point, you will need to return to your first, or home, culture, but that transition will bring a sense of anxiety. People and places change, the familiar is no longer so familiar, and you too have changed. You may once again be elated at your return and the familiar, and experience a sense of comfort in home and family, but culture shock may again be part of your adjustment. You may look at your home culture in a new way and question things that are done in a particular way that you have always considered normal. You may hold onto some of the cultural traits you adopted while living abroad, and begin the process of reintegration.



Figure 1.2.7.1: The international assignment requires adaptability. JT – Euro Note Currency – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

You may also begin to feel that the “grass is greener” in your host country, and long to return. Expatriates are often noted for “going native,” or adopting the host culture’s way of life, but even the most confirmed expats still gather to hear the familiar sound of their first language, and find community in people like themselves who have blended cultural boundaries on a personal level.

## Living and Working Abroad

In order to learn to swim you have to get in the water, and all the research and preparation cannot take the place of direct experience. Your awareness of culture shock may help you adjust, and your preparation by learning some of the language will assist you, but know that living and working abroad take time and effort. Still, there are several guidelines that can serve you well as you start your new life in a strange land:

1. *Be open and creative.* People will eat foods that seem strange or do things in a new way, and your openness and creativity can play a positive role in your adjustment. Staying close to your living quarters or surrounding yourself with similar expats can limit your exposure to and understanding of the local cultures. While the familiar may be comfortable, and the new setting may be uncomfortable, you will learn much more about your host culture and yourself if you make the effort to be open to new experiences. Being open involves getting out of your comfort zone.
2. *Be self-reliant.* Things that were once easy or took little time may now be challenging or consume your whole day. Focus on your ability to resolve issues, learn new ways to get the job done, and be prepared to do new things.
3. *Keep a balanced perspective.* Your host culture isn’t perfect. Humans aren’t perfect, and neither was your home culture. Each location and cultural community has strengths you can learn from if you are open to them.
4. *Be patient.* Take your time, and know a silent period is normal. The textbook language classes only provide a base from which you will learn how people who live in the host country actually communicate. You didn’t learn to walk in a day and won’t learn to successfully navigate this culture overnight either.
5. *Be a student and a teacher.* You are learning as the new member of the community, but as a full member of your culture, you can share your experiences as well.
6. *Be an explorer.* Get out and go beyond your boundaries when you feel safe and secure. Traveling to surrounding villages, or across neighboring borders, can expand your perspective and help you learn.

7. *Protect yourself.* Always keep all your essential documents, money, and medicines close to you, or where you know they will be safe. Trying to source a medicine in a country where you are not fluent in the language, or where the names of remedies are different, can be a challenge. Your passport is essential to your safety and you need to keep it safe. You may also consider vaccination records, birth certificates, or business documents in the same way, keeping them safe and accessible. You may want to consider a “bug-out bag,” with all the essentials you need, including food, water, keys, and small tools, as an essential part of planning in case of emergency.

## Key Takeaways

Preparation is key to a successful international assignment. Living and working abroad takes time, effort, and patience.

## Exercises

1. Research one organization in a business or industry that relates to your major and has an international presence. Find a job announcement or similar document that discusses the business and its international activities. Share and compare with classmates.
2. Conduct a search on expat networks including online forum. Briefly describe your findings and share with classmates.
3. What would be the hardest part of an overseas assignment for you and why? What would be the easiest part of an overseas assignment for you and why?
4. Find an advertisement for an international assignment. Note the qualifications, and share with classmates.
5. Find an article or other first-person account of someone’s experience on an international assignment. Share your results with your classmates.

## References

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