Beyond culture shock: Fitting into a new culture is a two-way street

Could organizations better support people working across borders? Acculturation research identifies key sources of stress, and shows how targeted support can turn misfit into adaptation rather than withdrawal.

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An American professional moves to Quebec for a project and is told that she should learn enough French to participate in meetings and liaise with government officials. A year later, having discovered that what is required on paper is not always required in practice, she remains at an intermediate level, and everyone else in the company continues switching to English.

Elsewhere, a Brazilian employee relocates to China to work for a multinational whose corporate language is English. Enchanted by the local culture, the newcomer learns Chinese and tries to adopt as many local practices as possible.

An English professional moves to Jamaica and is similarly drawn to the local culture — to the point that he begins imitating the hairstyles, clothing and accents of those around him.

These are all examples of acculturation — its different paths, successes and missteps. Acculturation is the process through which people adapt to a new cultural environment while retaining aspects of their existing cultural identity. It affects not only expatriates and permanent immigrants, but also migrant workers, international hires, employees on temporary assignments and others who cross borders for work over varying periods of time.

Historically, successful acculturation has often been attributed primarily to newcomers' choices: whether to embrace the new culture or hold on to their own. But finding your place in a new cultural environment is a two-way street, according to research by IESE's Yih-Teen Lee, with Marcus A. Valenzuela and Nana Yaa A. Gyamfi, published in the *Journal of International Business Studies*. Their model examines where cross-cultural adjustment goes right, and why it can go wrong or evolve over time.

Integrate, separate or adapt over time?

What matters, the research suggests, is not simply whether people integrate into the host culture, but how well their abilities and preferences align with the expectations and support they encounter in the new environment.

The model, therefore, focuses on *fit:* the alignment between what the environment demands and what the newcomer can deliver, as well as between what the newcomer needs and what the environment provides.

"Our main aim was to show that acculturation is a dynamic rather than static process," says Lee. "People arrive with particular abilities, needs and preferences, while organizations and

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host environments bring their own expectations and resources. When these come into contact, there can be too little or too much on either side. Importantly, however, an initial misfit is not the end of the story."

Three phases of acculturation

Reflecting the evolving nature of adaptation to a new culture, the model identifies three interconnected phases.

1. **The initial fit condition.** When people enter a new environment, their initial adjustment is shaped by two forms of alignment: whether their abilities meet the demands placed on them, and whether the environment provides what they need. Falling short of expectations, or receiving less support than needed, can generate considerable stress. Because deficiencies tend to affect people more strongly than gains, insufficient ability or support is often more consequential than having more than is required. Shared core cultural values can help buffer these strains.
2. **The stress trigger.** The strain created by misfit can become a catalyst for change. Individuals are likely to adjust either their behavior and preferences, or negotiate the support they need. Here again, there are chances to adapt well — pursuing active strategies — or badly, by withdrawing or disengaging.
3. **The evolving person.** Through repeated cycles of adjustment, people may change in more enduring ways. Efforts to meet local expectations and sustained engagement with the new environment can gradually reshape needs and even deeper cultural values. A temporary international experience may, therefore, have lasting consequences for how people understand themselves and relate to different cultures. This may be particularly significant for those moving between more collectivist and more individualist societies.

Throughout this process, shared values are more likely to drive stress in productive ways, toward improvement rather than withdrawing. These shared values can include beliefs about authority and hierarchy, means of communication and shared workplace values.

How individuals and organizations can both get the balance wrong

Some people working across borders may do less than their new environment expects.

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Others may do more. Both can signal misfit, and the same applies to the support provided by organizations.

Underperforming misfit

Illustrated by the American professional in Quebec. Her linguistic ability falls short of what the organization expects, potentially undermining her sense of competence and belonging. Such discrepancies are especially stressful because people tend to give greater psychological weight to negative experiences and perceived shortcomings, what’s known as negativity bias.

Underenabling misfit

The organization may also be at fault here. International workers may be eager to engage with local colleagues and learn local customs, but find themselves in workplaces that provide little mentoring, limited access to networks or insufficient language and cultural support.

Overenabling misfit

Some employees are primarily interested in performing their role and may have little desire for deeper cultural involvement, particularly when their job does not require it. Language courses, social events and extensive cultural training organized by the company may exceed what they actually need or want.

Overperforming misfit

This scenario may arise when newcomers adopt local behaviors and norms more extensively than expected. The English professional in Jamaica, for example, may believe that he is demonstrating openness and identification with the host culture. Yet colleagues may experience his behavior as uncomfortable, inauthentic or even as cultural appropriation.

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Why cross-cultural fit matters and how to manage it

International labor mobility now encompasses far more than traditional expatriate assignments. It includes migrant workers, international recruits, project-based professionals, seasonal workers and people moving across borders for periods ranging from a few months to an entire career.

When these people struggle to find their place, the consequences can include stress, burnout, defensive behavior, poor performance, social isolation and early departure. Yet treating every difficulty as evidence that the wrong person was selected overlooks the role of the environment, as well as the possibility that fit can improve.

The framework helps managers assess both sides of the relationship. Is the individual struggling to meet important demands? Is the organization failing to provide needed resources? Or is either side offering more adaptation or support than the situation requires?

These questions can guide more targeted approaches to recruitment, onboarding, mentoring, language development, workplace integration and ongoing support. They also remind us that acculturation does not happen once, on arrival. It unfolds through repeated interactions between people and their environments. An initial misfit need not mean failure: With the right adjustments on both sides, it can become the starting point for learning, adaptation and lasting growth.

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