

EMPLOYEE RELOCATION:

Domestic Culture Shock

*Understanding
& Avoiding Failed
Relocations*





As global moves have become commonplace, relocation and corporate professionals have gained a much better understanding of the phenomenon of culture shock. They are well aware of its very real consequences for assignees, their families and the companies involved, and increasingly, they take concrete steps to

avert or at least mitigate it, from candidate assessment, to weed out less-adaptable candidates, to cultural training, to help assignees anticipate the challenges and adapt to their new surroundings.

Yet relatively little attention is paid to cultural issues when relocating employees *within* a country. It is not as if domestic culture shock is unknown: the foibles of the country naïf suddenly placed in a fast-paced, urban environment and conversely, the city sophisticate dropped into humble, rural circumstances, have been the stuff of great literature (*Anne of Green Gables*, *Vanity Fair*, *Moby Dick*) and television sitcoms (“*Green Acres*”, “*The Beverly Hillbillies*”) alike.

Perhaps not surprisingly, when it is acknowledged at all, domestic culture shock is treated as more of a punch-line than a problem. Colleagues might tease the Houston executive about his upcoming move to New York City, or the Milan professional moving to Palermo, but intra-country culture shock is no laughing matter. It has at least as much potential to derail a relocation as international culture shock.

While there is no readily available hard data on failed assignments due to culture shock, relocation professionals know it exists through anecdotal and informal comments from clients.

Intra-Country Culture Shock is Real



According to Dean Foster, President of DFA Intercultural Global Solutions, culture-shock is simply the physiological and psychological phenomenon that occurs when the individual is required to deal with cultural differences that challenge their beliefs, expectations and even identity. And culture shock is as real for intra-country and intra-regional moves as it is for international moves. “I think that the more prevalent linguistic and cultural similarities that

Whether between countries or within a country, a transferee might encounter differences in beliefs, geography, climate, attitudes and protocols. These differences exist in most countries, regardless of size or location. They tend to be greater in very large, heterogeneous countries like the U.S., China and India, but they can be a factor even in smaller, more homogeneous countries.

According to Foster, most countries can point to significant north/south

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exist in domestic moves sort of blinds us to the impact of the differences that are there, and they can probably be even more profound than some international moves.”

Sean Dubberke, Director, Intercultural Programs at RW3 CultureWizard, concurs. “Domestic culture shock most definitely exists, especially in large countries where linguistic differences can make it difficult to communicate and interact with locals.”

differences, whether large (the U.S., India, Brazil, Russia, China) or small (Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy, Vietnam, Ireland, Egypt, Mexico, Spain); east/west differences (the same large countries plus many of the smaller ones); or ethnic regional differences (Israel, Sudan, Nigeria, Indonesia). Moves between rural and urban regions can also be profoundly dislocating, even within the same country.

When are Intra-Country Moves Most Likely to Produce Culture Shock?



DFA's Foster notes that if you combine several elements that make for differences, such as geography (i.e. north/south) and economics (i.e. rural/urban), you increase the effect of these differences—and culture-shock—exponentially. So a move between a rural village in southern India to Mumbai (and moves of this type are very common in emerging markets) would require significant adjustment.

But even in economically mature markets like Canada, the U.S. or the U.K., intra-country moves with several culture differences are likely to be much more difficult. For example, moving a Canadian Francophone family from Montreal to the Athabasca oil sands area in Alberta; moving a single, twenty-something man from a small town in Nebraska to New York City; moving a London-based family to a small town in Scotland.

As with international culture shock, if the assignee is being accompanied by family, the effects increase markedly. "Each family member is experiencing his or her own cultural challenges, and the family is also experiencing these aggregate challenges together," said Mary Beauregard, an Intercultural Consultant at Global LT.

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The More Things Remain the Same, the More They Change

Paradoxically, international culture shock is most acute in places that would seem relatively familiar. Why?

Because the scope and scale of differences in these “familiar” places are much greater than expected. Among Americans, for example, the destination that consistently produces the highest number of failed assignments due to culture shock is not China or India but the United Kingdom.

Americans moving to China or India expect marked cultural differences and are better prepared for them (they have also self-selected themselves to an extent as being game for an adventure). Americans moving to Britain, on the other hand, might have fond memories of London vacations; they expect the adjustment to be a breeze and any differences to be trivial and quaint. In fact, everything from shopping to driving to the side one stands on when riding an escalator is utterly different.

The same phenomenon holds true for intra-country moves. Because we either do not think about or make light

of intra-country differences, we really are not prepared for them. Explains DFA’s Foster, “The expectation that there are no differences because we are moving within the same national borders is an easy justification for not dealing with the reality that everyone within those same national borders will admit to: that people “over there” are just different from people “over here. West coast/east coast; north/south; rural/urban; coastal dwellers/mountain dwellers, all can reveal differences in lifestyle and work style that can be costly if not managed.”

“Culture surprise” might be a better way to describe this intra-country dislocation,” according to Global LT’s Beauregard. “It’s a loss of the familiar. It might not be as acute a shock as experienced in an international move, as significant cultural touchstones will often remain constant within the same country, but it is clearly a surprise, because it is so unexpected. Ethnicity, regional values and educational levels can be significantly different, and even seemingly minor differences can accumulate and create stress.”

Lifestyle versus Work Style Shock



In comparing intra-country and international cultural shock, there is an important distinction to make between lifestyle and work style shock. Within many developed countries, the lifestyle basics are similar from location to location. For example, within the U.S., regional cuisine and housing styles might vary, but the basic norms surrounding everyday life—meals, shopping, popular culture and the like are similar. In Los Angeles you probably commute by car; in New York, you likely use subways or taxis and might not even own a car. Still, duplicating one's lifestyle after an intra-country move is often relatively easy, compared with a move from Cleveland to Mumbai, for example.

For intra-country moves in many developed countries, the bigger culture shock issue, and the one that will likely be of more concern to employers, is work style differences. Said DFA's Foster, "While intra-regional moves may not affect lifestyle issues to the degree that these issues may be affected in some international moves, they certainly affect work style issues, which, if not managed successfully, can profoundly affect job and project performance."

Adds RW3's Dubberke, "In a country like the U.S., regional work style differences that might appear to be surmountable can present true challenges. For example, the brusque, task-focused approach typical of New Yorkers would be very frustrating for a person from a place

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with a more laissez-faire style, like Southern California.” Conversely, in business dealings, Northeasterners can find Angelinos maddeningly blasé; in their mind, lacking any sense of urgency to close deals and do business. And some topics that would constitute polite workplace conversation in one place would be puzzling or even insulting in others. “What church do you attend?” would be an unremarkable question in many Southern U.S. communities but would likely garner a response of “What?” in the Northeast U.S.”, said Global LT’s Beaugard.

She adds, “You also have the really interesting case of expatriates who might be settled in, and reasonably adjusted to, life in a host country location, but who must do business in other parts of the country,” For example, a Chinese national living in Los Angeles, but doing business in Atlanta or New York City. “That can bring a whole new set of cultural challenges.”

There is a real risk of alienating colleagues and potential business partners with a work style that is deemed inappropriate for the location. In international business, we expect some faux pas and make greater allowances for cultural differences and misunderstandings; within a country, and with fellow nationals, we are more likely to expect colleagues and partners to be like us, and to judge them more harshly when they do not behave as we expect. As with international moves, it is important to have an understanding of the local cultural norms, business and personal, if one is to succeed in the new location.

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Domestic Candidate Assessment



Candidates for assignments, whether international or intra-country, are overwhelmingly selected based on technical competence. Still, candidate assessment is a well-established tool for international assignments, helping to at least identify those who possess—or lack—the cultural adaptability competences to succeed in another location. In theory, at least, when there is more than one technically competent candidate for an assignment, the company can favor the candidate that is more culturally adaptable, and more likely to be successful.

Still, this is not a service that has gained traction in the business community, particularly in today's environment of cost-cutting. The management philosophy is more likely to be, "We need you in North Dakota, so deal with it."

Self-assessment tools might present a more practical alternative. RW3's Dubberke says that assignees can apply many of the self-assessment tools available for international assignments to intra-country moves as well. The company's Self-Assessment for Global Endeavors (SAGE) is designed to assess for international assignments, but many of the topics it covers would be

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Does candidate assessment make sense for at least some intra-country moves? It might very well. Global LT's Beauregard notes that many of the adaptability and suitability evaluations that are conducted for international moves would be applicable to intra-country moves as well. "How flexible is the candidate? How open is he or she to facing and asking about things that are unfamiliar? Will he be confident and sure of himself, but not arrogant?"

equally applicable to domestic moves, considering the degree of difference between cities like New York and Los Angeles or Milwaukee and Miami. For example, if you depend on a certain routine, hobby or other activity to reduce stress, what can you do to re-create this in the new location? When a family is moving along with the employee, a series of group conversations can facilitate mental preparation for life in a new location.

Cultural Training for Intra-Country Assignments



As with Candidate Assessment, Cultural Training is de rigeur for international assignments but largely unknown for intra-country ones. Companies that regularly transfer employees between locations—particularly those employees who are likely to encounter multiple cultural differences—might do well to consider it, though.

DFA's Foster explains, "Cultural training for intra-regional differences, especially when the impact of such differences is increased due to the transferee's personal situation (family, special needs, limited travel experience or exposure to other cultures), can achieve the same success as cross-border cultural training.

The Importance of Mentors



Most times when we are facing a new adventure, it is helpful to speak with someone who had undergone the same experience. The practice of assigning company mentors to international assignees is well established; it helps them to settle in more rapidly and effectively, and allows them to pick up sometimes unwritten and complicated local lifestyle and work style cues.

RW3's Dubberke says that mentors are as important for intra-country moves as international ones. "(Companies should) encourage assignees to identify a colleague he or she will be working with in the new location. Reaching out to schedule a candid conversation about not only working, but living in the new location is a great way to dispel some of the concerns assignees have, before they relocate."



Easing the Transition

While often dismissed, intra-country culture shock is real, and companies ignore it at their own peril. As with international culture shock, there is potential for failed assignments and relationships and the loss of valued employees.

With today's relocation budget constraints, companies may be unwilling to underwrite formal intra-country cultural training programs, but by recognizing this issue, assessing candidates carefully, using low- or no-cost tools and assigning destination location mentors, they can at least reduce the risk.



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