
Career Competencies for Managing Cross-Cultural Transitions

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ABSTRACT

The changing world of work requires that employees possess a repertoire of cultural competencies for managing their career development. As borders of trade, travel, and immigration shift throughout the world, people need to be prepared for working with others whose cultural background is different to their own. Key demographic and market trends that have impacted the cross-cultural nature of work, a framework for understanding cross-cultural transitions, and core competencies for managing transitions are discussed. Career development practices need to be expanded with both individuals and organizations in a world of work that is increasingly characterized by cross-cultural transitions.

RÉSUMÉ

Le monde changeant du travail exige que les employés possèdent un éventail de compétences culturelles variées pour diriger le déroulement de leur carrière. À l'époque où les frontières du commerce, des voyages et de l'immigration sont repoussées à travers le monde entier, les gens doivent se préparer à travailler avec d'autres dont les antécédents culturels sont différents des leurs. Dans cet article, l'auteur étudie les principales tendances du marché et les principales tendances démographiques ainsi que leur influence sur la nature interculturelle du travail. Il examine également le cadre pour une compréhension des transitions interculturelles et les compétences de base nécessaires à leur gestion. Dans un monde du travail caractérisé de plus en plus par des transitions interculturelles, les pratiques d'organisation de carrière doivent être mieux répandues parmi les individus et les organisations.

Canadians are facing major challenges in responding to the marketplace of a global economy. With Canada's economy becoming increasingly interdependent with people from other nations, the future of work is strongly influenced by the capacity of workers to manage in cross-cultural environments (Herr, 1993a, 1993b; Herr, Amundson, & Borgen, 1990; Westwood & Quintrell, 1994). This capacity includes strategies for working effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds in both local and international settings. The changing world of work requires that employees possess a repertoire of cultural competencies for managing their career development. These competencies include developing an understanding of cross-cultural transitions, incorporating skills and training to be marketable in an international labour force, and learning strategies for cross-cultural effectiveness. Concurrently, career counsellors need to understand the implications of shifting economic boundaries and to be familiar with ways to prepare people for managing their career development in changing cultural contexts (Herr, 1993a, 1993b; Herr et al., 1990; Westwood & Quintrell, 1994).

Canadians need to be prepared for the realities of cultural diversity. As borders of trade, travel, and immigration shift throughout the world, workers require cultural flexibility for interacting with people whose backgrounds are different to their own (Coleman & Barker, 1992; Herr, 1993a). In future roles with organizations and with individuals, career practitioners will be called upon to assist people to develop competencies for managing cross-cultural transitions. Therefore, career practitioners need to understand the nature of cross-cultural transitions and to be familiar with the competencies that their clients require for working in cross-cultural contexts. The purpose of this discussion is to examine career competencies for managing cross-cultural transitions. First, key demographic and market trends that have impacted the cross-cultural nature of work will be reviewed. This will be followed by a review of frameworks that have been proposed for understanding the nature of cross-cultural transitions. Core competencies for managing cross-cultural transitions will then be outlined. Career practitioners are in pivotal roles to enhance career development practices in a world of work that can be characterized by cross-cultural transitions.

CROSSING CULTURES IN THE WORLD OF WORK IN CANADA

Changing demographic trends in Canada account for the increasing cultural diversity of people in the labour force. For example, although the immigration rate to Canada has remained relatively stable throughout the last two decades, the proportion of immigrants coming from source countries has changed (Esses & Gardner, 1996). In the earlier part of the century, the majority of immigrants arrived from Europe and North America, however, over the last three decades, source countries have extended to Asia and the Middle East, the Caribbean, Americas, and Africa (Statistics Canada, 1995). These varied groups have introduced diverse cultural backgrounds and customs to Canadian society. As a nation of immigrants, Canadians have taken pride in their tolerance of diversity (Esses & Garner, 1996). Although national policies on multiculturalism have encouraged people to maintain their unique cultural backgrounds while sharing a common citizenship, there is considerable variation in ways that people adapt (Berry, 1999). Immigrants continue to face employment barriers due to language competency, problems in transferring credentials between countries, lack of familiarity with educational and employment systems, and systemic racism in social and employment practices (Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991). Both internal barriers (low self-esteem, lack of career information, inappropriate career decision-making skills), and external barriers (social expectation, inadequate educational preparation, untrained career personnel), continue to adversely impact the career development of culturally diverse populations (Coleman & Barker, 1992). The integration of people with different cultural backgrounds into the labour force also depends upon the felt sense of security in the lives of other Canadians. For example, fluctuations in the economy lead to intense competition for employment and other economic resources. Stereotypes and racist attitudes can be

linked to economic fears and the belief that immigrants “take jobs” from other Canadians (Palmer, 1996). Without efforts to bridge cultural differences between workers from diverse backgrounds, problems of employment access and mobility will continue to be major barriers in the lives of many Canadians. Career practitioners require specialized training to be knowledgeable about the barriers faced by diverse populations and to develop culturally responsive career practices (Coleman & Barker, 1992).

Employers are challenged to understand and respond to the needs of employees whose capacity for effective work relationships is essential for organizational success (Goodman, 1994; Granrose & Oskamp, 1997). Organizations have a responsibility to ensure that employees from culturally diverse backgrounds are aware of cultural influences on their behaviour. Otherwise, without an understanding of the cultural influences surrounding workplace behaviour, perceived differences tend to exacerbate conflict (Singelis & Pedersen, 1997). Knowledge about the cultural bases of behaviour can assist workers to develop informed perspectives about both similarities and differences between people.

Working Outside of Canada

Apart from demographic changes and shifting markets within Canada, the increasing importance of the global marketplace has focused attention on worker adjustment to foreign cultures. Preparing workers for international assignments and migration to other countries requires an understanding about the nature of cross-cultural transitions and strategies for cross-cultural effectiveness. For example, employees selected for foreign assignments are frequently chosen for their technical expertise, however, their capacity for positive cross-cultural adaptation is equally important. Inadequate preparation for the international workplace is costly to both organizations and individuals (Kealey & Protheroe, 1996; Parker & McEvoy, 1993). A prolonged negative cross-cultural experience and/or prematurely returning home may lead to serious consequences for workers in terms of their future career development and for the organization's future success in international markets (Harrison, Chadwick, & Scales, 1996).

Organizations are faced with many challenges in preparing employees for working both within and beyond the borders of Canada. As the nature of work changes, employees must be prepared for expanding job responsibilities and performance expectations. Changes in the work environment require employees to respond to shifting demands in local settings as well as the new challenges associated with living and working in foreign environments. Cutting across these organizational and environmental factors is the need for employees to have effective skills for interacting with people whose background and experience are diverse to their own. The changing world of work requires that employees expand their repertoire of competencies for managing their career development. As Canada's population and economy becomes increasingly interdependent with people from other nations, the future of work is strongly influenced by the capacity of workers to manage cross-cultural transitions.

THE NATURE OF CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSITIONS

Transitions involve a process in which individuals experience a shift in their personal assumptions or world view (Schlossberg, 1984, 1992). The process of transition often entails loss as familiar ways of operating, routines, beliefs, or settings must be left behind in order to adapt to changing life circumstances (Bridges, 1991). During transition, the central concern with identity requires people to have effective coping resources for managing emerging issues (Herr, 1993b; Schlossberg, 1984, 1992). Taxonomies of coping skills have been developed to address a variety of life transitions (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) as well as coping skills required for career transitions (Brammer & Abrego, 1992).

During cross-cultural transitions, it is exposure to norms and behaviour that contrast one's own culture that poses challenges for an individual's understanding of self, assumptions about others, or the beliefs about the world (Ishiyama, 1995; Zaharna, 1989). The nature of cross-cultural transitions can be characterized by their dimensions of voluntariness, mobility, and permanence (Berry, 1997). For example, some workers embark upon cross-cultural transitions voluntarily in order to expand their career opportunities. For other workers, cross-cultural transitions may be a reaction to unwanted circumstances that require them to leave familiar surroundings and move to geographical areas where employment prospects are greater. Employment practices that target greater numbers of workers from diverse backgrounds (Canadian Labour Force Development Board, 1997; Jamieson & O'Mara, 1991) mean that formerly homogeneous groups of employees are now faced with cross-cultural interactions when they may not have sought those interactions on their own. Career transitions to new cultural contexts may require only temporary exposure or long-term commitments to working with other people who do not share a common basis of cultural values. Although the demands of cross-cultural transitions may require people to make difficult adjustments, there is also the potential for profound learning and personal growth.

People in cross-cultural transition are immediately immersed in situations that require learning and adjustment to new role demands. Disruptions to familiar ways of interacting can manifest in psychological or physical reactions associated with culture shock (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960; Winkelman, 1994). It is important for people to understand that novel cross-cultural situations will inevitably require some form of adjustment and that culture shock is a natural reaction. However, stage models of culture shock (e.g., Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Oberg, 1960) do not sufficiently account for important intrapersonal and interpersonal variables that impact adjustment in new cultural contexts (Arthur, 1998a). An alternative framework that has been extensively applied to people in cross-cultural transitions is the process of acculturation (Berry, 1997). Acculturation refers to psychological change that results in adaptation to the new cultural context. Acculturative stress results when the demands of a new cultural context exceed personal coping resources (Berry, 1997; Lazarus, 1997). Depending upon factors such as the scope and severity of new cultural demands and

the individual's capacity for learning new ways of responding, acculturative stress may be experienced as minor adjustment problems or range to serious psychological disturbances (Berry & Kim, 1988). This perspective proposes that cross-cultural transitions are complex with interrelated factors involving psychological, sociocultural, and economic adaptations. Psychological adaptation refers to a set of internal psychological outcomes such as a clear sense of personal identity, positive mental health, and personal satisfaction in the new cultural context (Berry, 1997; Searle & Ward, 1990). In contrast to psychological outcomes, sociocultural adaptation refers to external psychological outcomes resulting from an individual's skills for managing social areas such as family, work, or learning roles (Berry, 1997; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). For example, employment is cited as a critical factor for personal satisfaction and economic viability in a new cultural setting (Berry, 1997).

Variation in the adaptation to cross-cultural transition can be explained by the extent to which people maintain their original cultural identity and the extent to which they engage in participation with other cultural groups (Berry, 1999; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Individuals who do not either want to or who are unable to hold on to their original cultural identity typically assimilate to the new culture. In contrast, individuals who strive to maintain their original cultural identity and who do not actively engage in new cultural contexts adopt a position of separation. Alternatively, if avenues for maintaining traditional cultural identity are blocked and there are barriers that prevent people from joining groups in the new culture, a sense of exclusion or marginalization can be experienced. A fourth acculturation strategy, that of integration, refers to an interest in maintaining some degree of one's original culture while participating as an active member of the new cultural context. However, a key assumption that must be challenged is the expectation of members of dominant groups for people in cross-cultural transition to assimilate to "mainstream" systems and norms for behaviour. For example, access to employment and power differences between employees in the work place can create pressure for people from diverse cultural groups to assimilate to the local environment (Fried & Matsumoto, 1997). Members of nondominant groups are often better informed about the practices and beliefs of dominant groups. As a result of acculturation demands and the need to access resources, nondominant group members may have more at stake in crossing cultural boundaries. In contrast, due to their socialization to a dominant role, some workers may be less motivated to examine the impact of their values and behaviour on others (Sue, 1995). Without a mutual investment, interactions in the work place are likely to be one-sided and perpetuate assimilation rather than the integration of cultural diversity. Beyond the good intentions of organizational programs to support cultural diversity, there needs to be motivation on the part of all employees to negotiate common understandings and to engage in new forms of behaviour. Beyond motivation for engaging in interactions with people from backgrounds that are different to one's own, people require skills for effective cross-cultural work relations.

PREPARING WORKERS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSITIONS

Predeparture Preparation

Training programs designed to address cultural diversity typically focus on providing information about the customs and practices of specific cultural groups. However, programs designed to address cross-cultural transitions, i.e., predeparture workshops (Goodman, 1994; Kealey & Protheroe, 1996; Saphiere, 1996), should also be designed to enhance awareness about the personal influences of culture. People display ethnocentrism when their behaviour is based in culturally specific values and when they do not incorporate culturally relevant information regarding the people around them. In other words, "what people bring" to cross-cultural transitions is as critical as factors in the environment. Self-awareness is key to understanding the reciprocal influences of culture during interactions with people from diverse backgrounds. Without an understanding of the way in which culture impacts personal behaviour and work place norms, ethnocentric attitudes may impede the flexibility that is necessary for cross-cultural effectiveness (Searle & Ward, 1990).

Another concern that has been levied against cross-cultural training programs is that providing too much information can lead to a false sense of competency (Saphiere, 1996). However, when people are expected to adapt to behaviour in a work place that has large contrasts from their home culture, it is unlikely that programs can go too far in their level of preparation (Parker & Envoy, 1993; Rogers & Ward, 1993). The need for effective cross-cultural interactions has led to an expanded focus of training programs to include "in-patriation" programs designed to prepare foreign workers for managing in the local environment (Harvey, 1997). These programs have emerged in response to the recognition that workers must be prepared for effective interpersonal relations on international work teams. Without training about ways to bridge cultural differences, interpersonal problems can jeopardize the success of international projects (Kealey & Protheroe, 1996; Saphiere, 1996).

Preparation for the Re-entry Transition

Investigations of cross-cultural transitions have paid more attention to the initial stage of entry than the stage of returning to one's culture of origin (Brabant, Palmer, & Gramling, 1990). However, the reverse culture shock experienced in readjusting to one's home culture may be the most difficult period of cross-cultural transition (Martin, 1984, 1986; Wang, 1997). This can be explained by unrealistic expectations and lack of awareness by both individuals and their significant others regarding adjustments required by re-entry transition. Four common themes in the literature on repatriation have been noted: challenge to self-concept, values conflict, unconfirmed expectations, and a sense of loss (Austin, 1986; Wang, 1997). Discrepancies between the expectations and realities of conditions in the home culture can prompt further dissonance about personal beliefs and lifestyles.

Along with preparing workers for entering new cultures, there is growing recognition of the need for re-entry programs that address the transition home (Black, 1992; Gregersen, 1992). For employees, the advantages are seen in supporting both personal adjustment and career development for successful integration back into the local setting. For employers, the benefits are clearly economic in nature. Given the prior investment made in workers who are chosen for international work, companies need to consider ways of protecting the investment they have made in human resources. Through supporting the repatriation process, companies are more likely to reduce employee attrition and keep the expertise that they have gained. Career counsellors have an important role in preparing people for cross-cultural work transitions and in assisting employees to transfer skills into existing jobs or new employment opportunities upon re-entry (Westwood & Quintrell, 1994).

It is unrealistic to expect that training programs can prepare workers for all of the situations that will emerge through working in cross-cultural contexts. Rather, workers can be equipped with a general framework for understanding and responding to their experience of cross-cultural transition (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Although many of the skills described in the following sections are essential for managing in daily living, the demands of working, studying, or living in new cultural contexts underscore their importance.

Communication Across Cultures

Effective communication skills, including communication between members of the same culture, are critical for success in cross-cultural transitions. As most cross-cultural employment projects require effective interactions for success, team-building strategies and strategies for managing interpersonal differences are essential (Arthur, 1998a; Saphiere, 1996). Interpersonal relations can become strained with the additional demands of adjustment required in unfamiliar cultural contexts. Effective communication to enhance group dynamics and problem-solving capacity are integral skills. However, skills that are effective for communicating with people from a similar background may have to be modified for relating to people from culturally diverse backgrounds. For example, cultural norms may dictate the degree of formal and informal, direct and indirect communication that occurs during business negotiations. Communication for cultural diversity requires competencies for interpreting meanings and responding in culturally appropriate ways (Pedersen & Ivey, 1993). Knowledge about the varying patterns of verbal and non-verbal styles of communication used in high- and low-context cultures can assist understanding and provide general guidelines for adapting communication skills.

Decision-making in Cross-cultural Contexts

Exposure to new cultural contexts may overtax the strategies people typically use for decision making. Exposure to different values may provide individuals with additional opportunities and choices. Alternatively, contrasting values may

be in conflict with people's beliefs about appropriate ways of behaving. Decisions that represent a shift to the values of the new culture must be carefully reviewed in terms of both the short- and long-term consequences. Although an individual may wish to pursue available choices, there may be severe and long-lasting consequences for going against the expectations of significant others in one's culture of origin. For example, values of religion, ethnicity, or notions of appropriate gender roles may determine style of dress, food, social activities, occupational selection, and choice of friends and marital partners. A central dilemma for decision making pivots around how far people in cross-cultural transition are prepared to go to preserve traditional values while pursuing available goals and opportunities. Decisions made in one cultural context can have profound implications for participation in roles defined by contrasting cultural values (Arthur, 1998b). Particularly when there are large contrasts between home and host cultures, decisions that are acceptable in one cultural context may be viewed as rejection of the values and relationships formed in another and, ultimately, mean severing relationships or the possibility of returning home. Decision-making requires consideration of the implications for relationships and roles in both cultural contexts.

Conflict Resolution Skills

Conflict management in cross-cultural relationships is made more complex by two factors. The possibility of conflict is greater due to the potential for miscommunication and misunderstandings between people who hold different cultural values. Conflict resolution may also be more difficult as competing perspectives can pose barriers to identifying mutual interests. Although confrontation and mediation are difficult cross-cultural skills, they are essential for managing cross-cultural transitions.

An innovative approach to cross-cultural conflict and mediation is the Interpersonal Cultural Grid (Pedersen, 1993; Pedersen & Ivey, 1993; Singelis & Pedersen, 1997). This taxonomy of behaviours and expectations is used to help people from culturally diverse backgrounds discover common goals. During cross-cultural interactions, behaviour can be misunderstood and become a source of distraction that breaks further communication. However, if the focus can be directed towards the intent of the behaviour and shared positive expectations, common ground can be used as the basis from which to negotiate alternatives. Through training people to see beyond differences in behaviour and to seek the common ground of positive expectancies, they can be assisted to develop a stronger basis for effective interactions. Strategies such as personal awareness about views of conflict, moving beyond blame and viewing cultural norms as the source of conflict, and negotiation skills for establishing common goals can minimize differences and keep the focus of interactions on similarities and areas of mutual benefit.

Stress Management Skills

Stress management skills have been identified as essential competencies for cross-cultural transitions (Harvey, 1997; Walton, 1990). Skill training in stress

management can help people identify and mobilize coping strategies in response to the perceived demands of cross-cultural environments. Cross-cultural training programs have been developed on the premise that knowledge about other cultures eases interactions, through learning about environmental conditions and cultural norms for behaviour. Information regarding cultural expectations and potential adjustment factors may be useful for anticipatory coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, it is recommended that cross-cultural training programs also assist individuals to assess their current repertoire for coping with stress. Although demands may be different and the usual coping resources not available in foreign environments, knowledge of the function and forms of coping can assist people to build temporary structures and routines.

As part of a repertoire of stress management skills, social support has been identified as a key coping resource (Searle & Ward, 1990). Social support includes both instrumental (e.g., advice, referral to resources) and emotional functions (e.g., encouragement, personal validation, expression of affect) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In reaction to cross-cultural situations that appear to be unchangeable, social support can provide a source of personal validation and encouragement (Arthur, 1998a). During cross-cultural transitions people may need encouragement to learn about culturally acceptable practices for resolving problems and to overcome personal impediments for accessing available support systems (Arthur, 1997). For example, employees may approach cross-cultural work assignments with a false sense of security due to high competencies in other work roles. Although the nature of work demands may become more complex during cross-cultural transitions, the individual may be reticent about disclosing the need for support. During predeparture planning, a coping "audit" can help individuals identify strategies, including a contact person available locally or through distance communication such as the Internet, to assist in accessing resources.

Monitoring Personal Adjustment in Cross-Cultural Transitions

When people are experiencing difficulties in the acculturation process, it is easy to lose sight of progress in managing cross-cultural transitions. This can lead to evaluations of the transition in absolute terms such as positive and negative or success and failure. Alternatively, people in cross-cultural transition can be encouraged to monitor specific areas of competency development. Tracking critical incidents or events that are meaningful in people's experience of transition is a useful approach for self-monitoring (Arthur, 1998a). This can be done either individually through questionnaires or worksheets in a journal format or in work groups where specific questions or prompts are used to direct discussion. Consistent with previous work in the field of stress management (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), critical incidents prompts can be focused on specific demands of cross-cultural adaptation such as interpersonal functioning, morale, somatic illness, and the sufficiency of coping strategies. The results of monitoring progress can be used to adjust coping efforts by both individuals and work teams who are operating in a cross-cultural environment (Arthur, 1998a).

Seeking Learning Opportunities in Cross-Cultural Transitions

People's view of transitions can either hinder or support their adjustment. It is without question that many involuntary transitions are the result of difficult and pervasive life circumstances. In the middle of a complex change process, it is easy to lose sight of the potential benefits of transition. The nature of cross-cultural transitions entails a period of dissonance in which personal meanings are challenged. Cross-cultural dissonance may result in a firm grasp on original cultural beliefs and rejection of contrasting values. Where this position is taken and maintained early in the transition experience, the risk is that individuals remain closed to experiencing aspects of the new culture that they might eventually appreciate.

The experience of transition provides individuals with opportunities for learning new ways of relating and responding in cross-cultural contexts (Anderson, 1994; Berry, 1997). It is often through experiencing cultural differences that people transform views about themselves and the world around them. While transitions may require letting go of certain ways and behaviour, i.e., cultural shedding (Berry, 1997), they also offer the potential for immense cultural learning. Keeping sight of personal goals and monitoring progress are strategies that can help people stay motivated to identify positive features of transition.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The shift from living, learning, and working in similar ways to incorporating diversity requires Canadians to be equipped with cross-cultural competencies. Canadian business and educational institutions can no longer afford to operate from perspectives that do not incorporate the needs of culturally diverse workers, students, and members of our local communities. The future of Canada's economy is also defined by our capacity to be competitive in the international marketplace. With increasing opportunities for employment mobility in both national and international settings, Canadians must be prepared for work roles involving people from other countries. Currently, most adults are exposed to international work on the basis of their professional expertise for a particular project. This ad hoc entrance into the international arena leaves many employees ill-prepared for the demands of working in unfamiliar cultural contexts. The increasing importance of global markets demands that we rethink our approach to preparing a workforce that is skilled not only in designated areas of technical expertise but also in their preparation for working in the international marketplace (Hansen, 1990; Herr, 1993a).

The changing world of work requires that cross-cultural competencies be viewed as integral features of career development. In order to equip youth for the workplace of the future, career planning must include preparation for working with people from other cultures and from other countries. International education and study abroad programs are career development opportunities for gaining exposure to diverse cultural and professional practises found in other countries. Increasing efforts need to be directed at opportunities for Canadian students to study in other countries and to interact with foreign students who

attend Canadian institutions (Arthur, 1997). Second language fluency, knowledge of sociopolitical and economic systems, education in other countries, travel experience, knowledge of cultural differences, and skills for managing cross-cultural transitions are key areas to integrate into career planning for the global economy. Those people who have had the foresight to incorporate cross-cultural competencies into their career development will have a tremendous advantage in the workplace of the future (Hansen, 1990).

The focus of this discussion has been on cultural trends that are shaping career development and the importance of preparing people for working in cross-cultural contexts. However, it is essential that practitioners be adequately prepared to address the career development issues faced by people in cross-cultural transition (Coleman & Barker, 1992; Westwood & Quintrell, 1994). This requires an examination of the curricula used to train career practitioners. Both theoretical and applied models of career development must be relevant for diverse populations and must provide practitioners with guidance for preparing people for working in cross-cultural contexts (Hesketh & Rounds, 1995). This also requires practitioners to access information regarding the larger cultural forces that are shaping the career development needs of Canada's labour force. Finally, as professions within the fields of psychology and counselling examine ways to prepare practitioners for working effectively with culturally diverse populations in global settings (Leach, 1997), it is timely to encourage practitioners to address their own career development needs for cross-cultural competencies.

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