



## Cross-Cultural Agility

Selecting for and building the key capabilities of successful global executives  
Part 2

### A Roadmap for Long-Term Cross-Cultural Success

Cross-Cultural Agility can be identified by skilled professionals with appropriate tools. Spencer Stuart has developed a number of such tools that are administered by our consultants and assessment professionals. However, understanding the key capabilities of cross-cultural agility — the ability to work effectively with people from another cultural background in another cultural context — and selecting leaders who possess it are only part of the equation. Oftentimes, the pool of candidates for an assignment is small and candidates will possess some characteristics of cross-cultural agility and lack others. Whether there are gaps in cross-cultural capabilities or the candidate seems to be an ideal fit, the transition is nevertheless a significant one. The most successful international assignments occur when the hiring manager, HR leader and the executive collaborate on the preparation for and continued development on such a journey.

### **CROSS-CULTURAL ASSIGNMENT SUCCESS: WHAT THE ORGANIZATION CAN DO**

Many dimensions impact the success of a cross-border assignment, from expectations of the role to the changed dynamic with the home office. Actions can be taken at the enterprise level to both help the individual executive navigate these myriad issues as well as build cross-cultural agility throughout the entire organization.

---

Despite cross-border work being a high priority, most executives in our study did not know whether or not their company offered an assessment or development program for international assignments.

---

### Take a holistic approach

We have found that it is helpful for the HR leader, the executive's boss and the executive to explore some key questions on the various facets of an international assignment when establishing plans for a three-to-five-year timeframe. These questions can be especially valuable when cross-cultural agility needs to be developed further.

### Succeeding in the role

- What are the longer-term measures for success in the new role? For example, a newly transferred executive may be charged with identifying and grooming a local leader to become his or her successor once the assignment is over — a goal that is carried out over a period of years versus months.
- What were the development issues that the executive had in his or her previous role? These are likely to carry over into the new role. For example, being overly cautious about sharing information can be a manageable problem in a domestic leadership role, but can be fatal in a foreign assignment.

### Balancing professional and personal life

- What are the development goals for the family? How can the family best take advantage of the international experience?

### Relating to the home office

- How will the executive maintain communication and relationships with the home office? It is important to find ways to stay in the flow of information without the physical presence.

### Transitioning back home

- How will we help the executive prepare for the transition back home? How can he or she make use of learnings from his or her international assignment to become more effective in all business dealings?

### Create and communicate about formal programs

While individual executives with cross-cultural agility can set a positive example, organizations need a deliberate strategy to develop it on a wider scale. A formal development program not only builds cross-cultural agility within the organization's current talent bench, but also can serve as a powerful recruiting tool for talent. However, MNCs need to ensure that executives are aware that assessment and development programs for international assignments are available. Despite

cross-border work being a high priority, most executives in our study did not even know whether or not their company offered an assessment or development program for international assignments.

## **CROSS-CULTURAL ASSIGNMENT SUCCESS: WHAT THE EXECUTIVE CAN DO**

An international assignment is a significant move, personally and professionally. We have found that the most successful executives take ownership of their cross-border experience, enabling the benefits to last long after the assignment is over.

### **Make the first 100 days count**

Once the executive is settled, making the right first impression in the organization can set the tone for the remainder of the assignment. Success in the first 100 days will embolden the executive and his or her employees and family to confidently set the course for the rest of the journey. It is also important for the executive to learn the local business issues as quickly as possible. It is common for executives to discover that the manner of business transactions, the style of negotiating, how customers make buying decisions and the protocols of business meetings may be quite different from their home countries. Local regulatory and government policies will also vary. In multi-country or multi-divisional organizations, each entity may have different cultural norms and may vary significantly in their economic development. Thus, getting advice early on from colleagues on the ground is key.

Todd Shaw was transferred to Hong Kong from the U.S. to lead Bank of America's Asia Pacific (APAC) region's human resources group. He had never lived abroad before, but was aggressive in his approach to learning and said, "Executives need to approach these opportunities with a spirit of adventure, openness and desire to learn." His former manager said that Todd scheduled hour-long "tutorials" with local APAC leaders on the many differences in how business was conducted across the variety of economies and cultures in Asia. He was frank about what he didn't know, which gave others permission to openly share and help fill in the blanks. After a year, Todd developed a body of cultural knowledge and adopted a very flexible and culturally appropriate approach to business solutions. He went on to become senior vice president of HR for VeriFone, a highly global corporation. Organizations can enable or even plan these kinds of educational meetings to help ensure the executive learns about the landscape early in the assignment.

### Think about the big picture

Leaders should stay focused on the role an international assignment plays in their overall career story. The assignment was accepted because it provides opportunities for growth and development, such as specific market expertise or general management exposure — leaders should not reach the end of the assignment without the experiences they came to build amid everyday pressures competing for their time.

### Maximize the experience

An international assignment can have profound and lasting effects that transcend the leader's career. The opinion of the 25 global executives who we asked whether the international assignments benefited them personally was astonishingly unanimous. One executive stated that putting his children into a strong international school made them global citizens for life. Another remarked that sharing so many stimulating journeys together during his international assignment made his marriage stronger.

### Prepare for challenges going home

Some people find it hard to re-acclimate to their home countries after the end of an international assignment. One executive advises expats to relocate to a new location upon returning to their home country, reasoning that they would have less in common with friends who have not experienced other cultures. One international executive from Sao Paulo who lived in Asia and London shared his experience with this disconnect, noting, "I still have friends from Sao Paulo, but I just don't have as much in common with them as someone who has also lived in remote parts of the world. It's a more relevant and interesting, common experience."

### Draw on cross-cultural agility for future career changes

In some cases, executives can also apply the cross-cultural agility paradigm to other types of potential career transitions, such as a significant change in functional role or industry. Shifting from sales to marketing may not be so significant, but shifting from an administrative support role in finance or human resources to a general management role may require a more deliberate transition plan. It may be helpful to consider applying the five capabilities to such a transition:

1. **Curiosity** – The desire to learn a new role or industry
2. **Risk-taking** – The ability to take the chance on a dramatic move

3. **Self-awareness and adjustment** – The ability to recognize your strengths and weaknesses and adapt to a novel situation
4. **Knowledge of the new environment** – The understanding of how knowledge and insight is built over time
5. **Support system** – The existing external foundation (i.e., family, friends and other situational factors) to help cope with the change and stress of the transition

### **Conclusion**

International assignments have high stakes for both the individual leader and the organization. Identifying executives with strong cross-cultural agility is vital, but it is only part of the process. Once a leader has been selected, the focus must shift to efforts to continue his or her development and to foster cross-cultural agility throughout the enterprise. With collaboration and open discourse among the executive, the hiring manager and HR leaders, a cross-border assignment can evolve into a journey of long-term success.

We appreciate the firsthand insights shared by senior leaders including:



**Terry Clontz**, former president of BellSouth's Asia Pacific region and chairman of Singapore-based StarHub



**Tsun-yan Hsieh**, chairman of Linhart Group and CEO and board adviser



**Keith Barr**, chief commercial officer of International Hotels Group



**Geoff Haydon**, CEO of Absolute Software



**Tim Love**, former vice chairman of Omnicom Group



**Larry Scott**, commissioner of the Pac-12

#### **About the author**

Phil Johnston provides executive search and assessment services, with an emphasis on cross-cultural agility, to a range of international clients. He previously led Spencer Stuart's Southeast Asia and Western U.S. businesses. He combines more than 15 years of executive search experience with 20 years of technology and life sciences industry expertise. Phil has conducted more than 150 board, CEO and CEO succession assignments for global life sciences and technology companies, and is a human resources functional expert.

## ABOUT SPENCER STUART

At Spencer Stuart, we know how much leadership matters. We are trusted by organizations around the world to help them make the senior-level leadership decisions that have a lasting impact on their enterprises. Through our executive search, board and leadership advisory services, we help build and enhance high-performing teams for select clients ranging from major multinationals to emerging companies to nonprofit institutions.

Privately held since 1956, we focus on delivering knowledge, insight and results through the collaborative efforts of a team of experts — now spanning 56 offices, 30 countries and more than 50 practice specialties. Boards and leaders consistently turn to Spencer Stuart to help address their evolving leadership needs in areas such as senior-level executive search, board recruitment, board effectiveness, succession planning, in-depth senior management assessment and many other facets of organizational effectiveness.

For more information on Spencer Stuart, please visit [www.spencerstuart.com](http://www.spencerstuart.com).

### Social Media @ Spencer Stuart

Stay up to date on the trends and topics that are relevant to your business and career.

