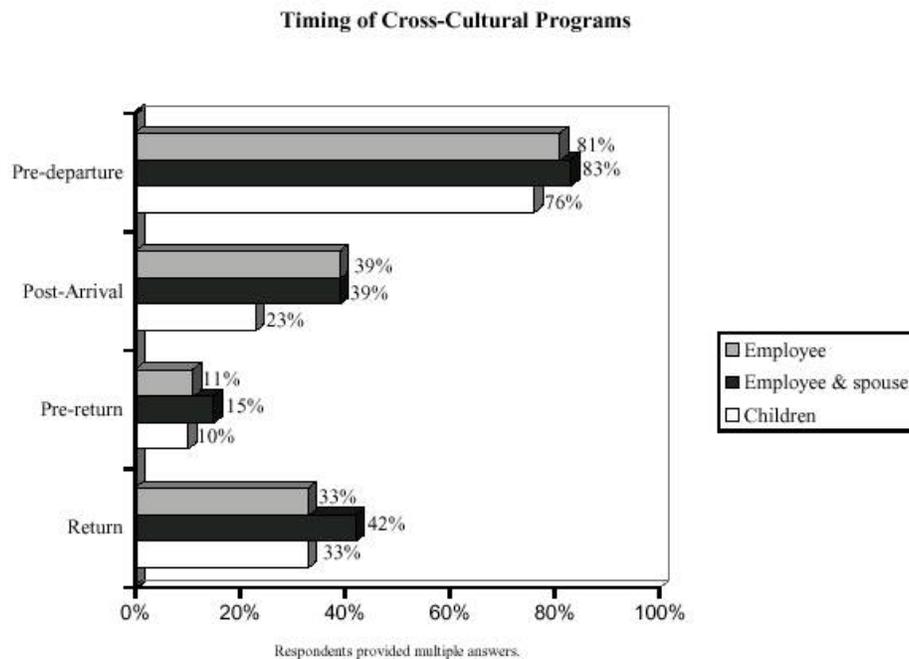


Cross-Cultural Programs: Pre-departure or Post-arrival?

It is obvious that the majority of the expatriate population (world-wide) that receive Cross-Cultural training are US based employees departing from the US.

Herewith a graph that triggered my motivation to write this article. In a survey sponsored by SHRM on "Global Relocation Trends – 2000 Survey Report" the following details are give on the timing of Cross-Cultural programs:



The major conclusion is of course that both departure and return training is given in the home rather than the host country. We have heard arguments in support of pre-departure training. Yes, you better are prepared than sorry. But isn't that true than also for return training?

We deliver our cultural programs, which we provide for Belgium, The Netherlands, France and many other destinations between one and three months upon arrival. These should however be preceded by a country briefing report before departure but which can easily be done in a brief coaching by HR staff, the company's intranet or the internet. So what do we actually do more than a country briefing?

We focus more on the individual's expatriation issues rather than at the host country's specifics in the first place. Just as understanding one's own values is a pre-requisite to cultural awareness before being able to understand and accept other people's values, so do expatriates need to be aware of how much they are a cause of change in their host country before they can positively plan for adapting themselves to that different environment.

That's why we spent much time in a workshop with expatriates from all over the world (from Japan to the US and from Africa to Russia) to exchange and discuss their first impressions, feelings, behavioral experiences and thoughts about the host country. The amazing and striking learning points for the participants are the strong differences in those feelings, experiences and thoughts depending on the country they come from rather than how these are the result of traits and behaviors from the host country nationals. That is the most powerful experience to convince the expatriates that not the host country but THEY have to change if they want to be effective in living in their new host country.

This sets the tone for dealing with the second most important section of the workshop, again before tackling country specific issues, namely, how do I adapt?

There are two important steps to be considered to achieve that. The first one is to enable the expatriate to cope with what is unfortunately given a dramatic name, namely "culture shock". Although the essence of culture shock is not only culture but all the changes one has to deal with on top of the cultural issue, this cultural issue is the second step in the process.

When we speak about culture shock we focus on what the individual needs to do and plan for in order to cope with all the changes they go through in just a few weeks time. Not only communication (language, signs, non-verbal, traffic signs, and so on) change, but also the house, colleagues, the boss, the office, the grocery shop, food, sports, schools, movies, everything. How much change can one cope with when most people get already pretty stressed when they just move houses in the same city?

Again, learning seems to be especially effective here because they can link recent experience being already in the country with tips, to do's and advises which are discussed in the workshop.

Understanding culture and host country values is the second step. This is a short cultural awareness session where once again, understanding one's own values is as important as understanding the host country values.

The final section focuses indeed more on country specific behavior, information and tips. Although less important, expatriates learn this quickly by themselves after a few months if they make the effort to learn. The fact that the trainer/coach lives in the host country or in the region is very beneficial. To illustrate that, and it could be unfair towards the professionals who generally do a good job in the States, but when we receive expatriates from their hands we still have to say them, as an example in relation to a move to Belgium:

- Yes, the Americans know the Belgians for their waffles, but the Belgians themselves don't. The Belgians believe everybody knows them for their French fries and wonder why English speaking people call them French.
- Yes, French is spoken by a very large part of the Belgian population but the largest part speaks Dutch (not Flemish).
- And yes, Belgians have particular strange driving habits but they wonder why this is the only subject of discussion among American expatriates.

Luc De Haes
LEUVION