

People who live abroad are different than those who have not traveled. International employers recognize this and so do the expat families who make a living overseas. I remember being uneasy meeting diplomats when traveling to Lagos, Nigeria on my first excursion outside my home province of New Brunswick, Canada. These diplomats alarmed me with their “we are different than you” attitude. But after a few encounters, I realized that they were different, their spouses were different, and even their children were different. Their unique set of skills set them apart from the average North American. I now identify these unique skills and traits with the term “International IQ.”

### YOUR INTERNATIONAL IQ

Just imagine yourself in a few years looking for an international job, applying to study abroad, or selling your skills as an international intern. Below are four categories outlining how international people are different. These insights will help you understand what international recruiters are looking for and will help you learn how to join the ranks of those working and living abroad.

- **Political, economic and geographic knowledge:** Imagine a dinner conversation taking place around a table in a lush garden terrace — in your temporary home in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. Your seven guests are from France, Belgium, the US, and Burkina. The expatriate conversation is rich in world politics, economics, and geography. The conversation is lively and intellectual. (Even if you are on a beach drinking beer in Thailand, you'll find yourself engaged in worldly conversations with other travellers.) You enjoy the dialogue, and you know these conversations are so much better than the typical North American conversation about weather, neighbours, or the costs of housing renovations. People with high International IQs can converse intelligently about international news, world events, and multiple countries and their ethnicities. To become an international person, start traveling and read world politics and learn geography. Your first test question: How many countries are there on Earth?
- **Knowledge about the international aspects of your field:** There is an international aspect to every field of work, to every area of study, to each and every field of interest. If you are going to go international, you have to develop a good knowledge of the international aspects of your area of expertise. Know which organizations work internationally in your field, what the types of jobs are, and what aspects of your work have an international application. Knowing how your specialization is practiced in an international setting allows you to focus your education, job research, networking contacts, and your discussions with peers on landing the right job for you abroad. A bit of research will uncover the international aspects of your area of expertise: look for the umbrella organizations, the web sites, the trade magazines, and international conferences in your field. Your first challenge: talk to people in your field who have worked overseas to find out what skills they have and how they broke into working internationally.
- **Cross-cultural knowledge and skills:** Do you know when to burp at a table and when to hold it in? Can you figure out how close to stand next to a stranger in an elevator or while holding a conversation at a cocktail party? Can you tell that someone is being polite when they agree to your proposal, but that they will not follow through? International people have the cross-cultural skills and knowledge to be effective in another culture. They study the country's belief systems, modes of behaviour, and attitudes before they arrive. International people are like cross-cultural detectives. If they are thrust into an unfamiliar culture or meet someone with an ethnicity they have never encountered before, they will be sensitive and skilful; they will quickly display the appropriate cross-cultural traits required to make any new

relationship work. Their skills are portable and can be carried from country to country, place to place, and culture to culture. The ability to utter a few words in the local language is important to those living there. Your first assignment: Acquire these skills at home by seeking out people from other cultures, becoming active in cross-cultural groups, and learning a second or third language.

- **Personal coping and adapting skills:** Can you deal with change? Can you deal with having to eat soup each morning for breakfast, as they do in some parts of India, instead of sitting down to cereal? Can you sleep in a room with a humming fan, a stifling mosquito net, and the constant noise of goats and chickens just outside your bedroom window? How about being so overwhelmed with a continuous stream of well-meaning visitors — so many that you fake the need for prayer time just to have two hours alone? These are just a few of the numerous cross-cultural challenges that require so many small adjustments that you may think at times that you are going mad. With practice and insight you can improve your personal coping and adaptation skills to help you deal with culture shock. People who enjoy living and working overseas are adaptable and tend to embrace challenges. You will face changes in culture, friends, work, climate, and food. Therefore, having a sense of adventure, as well as humour, curiosity, and a great deal of patience, is invaluable. To prepare yourself, you can do volunteer work or become active in organizations which put you in contact with other cultures, either in your home country, or by visiting a country where the culture is radically different from your own. Your test question: Do you like change? Your ability to enjoy change may be the single biggest factor in assessing your suitability for work and life abroad.

### OVERSEAS EFFECTIVENESS SKILLS

This list of characteristics will help you assess your suitability for overseas work and assist you in preparing to live in a foreign environment. Self-knowledge is power in today's job market. When you understand your skills and career objectives and have a professional self-assessment of your cross-cultural work skills you will be much more effective and focused when dealing with international recruiters.

- **General traits:** enjoyment of change, desire for challenge, having street smarts, sense of adventure, open mindedness, patience, and curiosity
- **Adaptation and coping skills:** emotional stability and ability to deal with personal stress, understanding of culture shock, receptivity, flexibility, humour, and self-knowledge
- **Intercultural communication skills:** tolerance, sensitivity, listening and observing skills, nonverbal communication skills, and second language speaking skills
- **Work-effectiveness traits and skills abroad:** independence and self-discipline, training experience, resourcefulness, versatility in work, persistence, organizational and people skills, leadership, energy, a calm demeanour, project planning skills, writing skills, verbal communication skills, diligence and dedication, loyalty, diplomacy and tact, and a philosophical commitment to your field of work

### A LAST WORD

International recruiters are looking for people who are different: people with a high International IQ. By carefully assessing your own international skills and traits against the cross-cultural blocks of skills described in this article, you can compile a strong skills inventory and convey these qualities to recruiters. Keep your international skills inventory in mind when applying as a volunteer or intern abroad, for international scholarships, or for full-time work abroad. If you can professionally explain that you have a high International IQ, your next assignment abroad will be just a flight away!

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