Roberta Neault, a career and recruitment specialist from British Columbia, vividly remembers a comment made by one of her clients, a talented brand manager. “One particularly stressful day, she sighed and said, ‘I wish I was back on my water buffalo!’”

Neault thought something had been lost in translation and viewed the comment as an expression of her client’s frustration. She was wrong.

“In fact, this highly professional woman, with an award-winning international career, had been raised by a single mom in a village in Viet Nam,” Neault says. “Not only was her water buffalo the family’s means of earning a living in the rice paddies, it was their prime means of transportation and the family pet. I can’t begin to imagine the ongoing cultural adjustments this young woman makes as she returns home for family visits in her village and then flies back to her international, high powered career in New York City.”

As business becomes increasingly global in nature, and international relocations more common, the question facing many employers is how to help workers navigate the countless cultural and linguistic nuances involved in a long-distance move. With Canada’s growing labour shortage, they are also asking how they can better integrate the influx of immigrant workers already in Canada.

The answers are often complex, says Darryl Simsovic, president of Bertlitz Canada Inc., which has a long history of providing language and culture training. In fact, a full understanding of culture goes deeper than most people think. “The culture that people see is really what is... above the water line,” says Simsovic. “What drives culture is years and years and generations and generations of history, which is below the surface. I don’t think that we give enough credence to the whole idea of how important culture is, and how different culture is below the surface.”

“Despite the differing cultures that individual employees bring, firms could use their ‘organizational culture’ to bind their diverse employees together,”

ED NG, TRENT UNIVERSITY

Companies need to look beyond the obvious when preparing their employees to a new cultural environment

These below-the-surface elements often have little to do with the obvious — such as language or food preference — and more to do with the way individuals interact in society and the views and beliefs that they hold. As a result, two countries of similar culture, such as Canada and the U.K., can nonetheless have notably different work ethics. Some countries are more hierarchical in their work style, others more laissez-faire.

According to Ed Ng, assistant professor at Trent University’s business administration program, culture can generally be looked at from four dimensions, all of which impact work ethics and management styles. They are individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity-femininity. In individualistic societies like Canada and the U.S., individual rewards are emphasized. In collectivist societies, the opposite holds true. “In a collectivist society such as China or Japan, group rewards are preferred,” explains Ng. “It would be bad management to single out and praise an individual employee in front of his or her peers in Japan.”
The same applies to power distance relationships: the way in which senior-level management communicates with entry-level employees. “Canada is a much more egalitarian society where senior management often interacts and mingles with lower level employees. In a high power distance country such as India, organizational hierarchy is to be respected, and inequality in power and wealth is the norm,” Ng says.

Going deeper
With many companies still focusing on the obvious, i.e. language differences, rather than the more subtle nuances of work ethic, there remains a fallacy that it is easier for professionals to move from one country to another sharing the same language. Yet in fact, it can be very challenging. It is also exacerbated by relocatees expecting a smooth integration and often arriving unprepared. In fact, says Berlitz’s Simsovic, one study from a few years ago showed that transfers from the U.S. to the U.K. had some of the highest failure rates. “There is a false understanding or a sense where they feel that because they speak the language, they know the culture,” Simsovic says.

In reality, cultures in English-speaking nations vary tremendously, especially in the area of relationship building. “In the U.S., typically you get invited over to people’s houses for barbecues, but it doesn’t mean that they love you and want to be your best friend,” says Simsovic. “It’s just the way the people socialize. In the U.K., you really need to be close to somebody to be invited to their house.”

The difficulties are not always one-sided. The problems of Americans relocating to Canada, for instance, tend to be greater than that of Canadians moving to the U.S. This is because Canadians are much more familiar and at ease with American culture — through media, television and film — than Americans are with Canadian life. “Canadians don’t really know all that much about Canadian culture and the difference between Canada and the United States because there is very little dialogue in the media,” says Simsovic.

Similarly, moving relocatees from France to Quebec can be challenging. One Montreal-based relocation professional says that managers from France tend to bring their hierarchical working style with them, disgruntling the Quebec staff who report to them. These professionals then need to be reeled in and retrained in a more team-oriented work ethic. Taking the time to do this in advance would clearly be a better solution.

There are also those companies that feel they already have a good grasp of cultural nuances because of the many different cultures that co-exist in a harmonious fashion in Canada. However here too, perception can differ from reality. Not only does an occasional trip to an Indian restaurant — with its ‘Canadian-ized’ menu — provide a weak link to the culture, most Canadian professionals of ethnic background have long integrated to a Canadian work style. Should they be relocated to the country of their origin, it may prove equally challenging for them with its different work ethic. “I don’t think we should lull ourselves into believing that because we have people from these cultures around us that we have a good understanding of their culture,” Simsovic says.

Training vital
To that end, cross-cultural training becomes a crucial component of any international move, even if it’s only across the southern border. Yet for many cash-strapped organizations, this type of training is not viewed as an important enough investment to back. “Most Canadian firms, concerned with high turnover, do not see language and cross cultural training as an investment because of the cost,” says Trent University’s Ng.

Some experts say that Canadian companies lag behind their American and Japanese counterparts, who see such training as helping their bottom line. “Japanese firms, with their lifetime employment practices, are much more willing to invest in language and cultural training, contributing to their successes abroad,” Ng says.

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Along with proper training, one way of overcoming cultural barriers is to focus on company culture as a uniting force. “Despite the differing cultures that individual employees bring, firms could use their ‘organizational culture’ to bind their diverse employees together,” says Ng. “WestJet has a distinct culture of ‘caring for customers’ regardless of the ethnic background of the individual employees.”

Roberta Neault, who runs Coquitlam-based Life Strategies Ltd., says team-building workshops are also useful, as are using tools like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or Personality Dimension. “Such tools help team members speak their unique personal styles without necessarily linking them to cultural heritage,” she says.

Some international companies, like Citibank, have started hiring foreign students who are studying abroad. They call these students, who then return to their homeland to entry level positions, “sea turtles.” Says Ng: “They are well versed in both North American culture as well as those of their home country.”

As well, there is the combination of global media and modern technology that is helping break some cultural barriers. Today’s global business playing field has players of diverse backgrounds interacting with each other without leaving their desk. “Technology has clearly made the world a smaller place,” says Jordan Bank, chief executive officer of JumpTV, a Mississauga-based company that offers over 300 international channels from more than 90 countries via the internet. “Existing cultural nuances are better understood and are able to be addressed through real-time connections because of the internet and emerging media platforms.”

In the end, understanding the culture of the workplace is a crucial component to business success and cannot be ignored. It is critical that relocatees understand how business is done and how to communicate effectively and seamlessly adapt in a new work environment. It is also important for employee and company alike that the move is fulfilling and pleasing, delivering long-term success.

“Cultural differences are actually very important in the way we do business,” says Simsovich. “They can make or break a deal for you.”

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