



- Culture Shock Korea -

About the challenges expats are facing abroad

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International assignments gain popularity and nearly a quarter of all globally active companies decide to send their employees to work abroad temporarily or permanently. These so-called expatriates (frequently shortened to “expats”) and their accompanying families are exposed to new challenges in the country other than that of their upbringing. The longer the work-related stay abroad the greater the impact it might have on expats. Yet, an often forgotten aspect of the assignment cycle is also the repatriation, which requires additional attention.

A new culture and language, a new work environment and high expectations from the headquarter in the home country can be perceived as extremely stressful factors for an expat to deal with. Already the start-up phase of getting settled in Korea can generate some stress: apartment search, rental contract signing, bank account opening, mobile phone contract signing, to name just a few things that need to be handled in a foreign country with a writing system one is (possibly) not familiar with. Many local procedures and requirements vary significantly from those back home. Moreover, the language barrier makes the process itself even more difficult – if not impossible – to handle on one’s own and without the local language command. Resilient people will manage to cope well with such challenges, while it can potentially be a huge burden for those more sensitive ones, and eventually causing a culture shock.

The term "culture shock" describes a feeling of anxiety, loneliness and confusion that people sometimes experience when they first arrive in another country. This can cause alienation, confusion, surprise, etc. that may be experienced when one culture is brought into sudden contact with another culture and the individual is encountering unfamiliar surroundings¹. Any significant change in the daily routine can be a huge stress factor and any assignment abroad can be a serious revolt in the everyday life. No matter how positive the experience abroad may be in overall, there is no doubt that the expat and accompanying family will be exposed to serious stress factors and, according to some scientific studies, even be at risk of illness.

The country of residence as well as the age of the expat, can be determined as health-influencing factors. Expats more advanced in age are significantly more likely to suffer from a culture shock than their younger peers. The health condition during the posting abroad tends to remain much better among single expats than among married ones or couples.

The greater the cultural differences between the upbringing country and the country of residence, the greater the impact they may have on the health condition of an expat. Furthermore, a significantly higher risk of culture shock is often reported among the accompanying family members rather than the expat.

¹ www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/culture-shock (2019.07.02)

Adaptation and integration within a new environment become in general more challenging with age, as seniors tend to have more habits established, as well as an increased likelihood of numerous health complaints.

It is however surprising, that the cultural shock might be greater for the expat's partner or family. A significant part of patients of many psychologists and psychotherapists working and living abroad for a longer period of time are accompanying family members of expats. Apart from psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, isolation and burn-out syndrome, physical illnesses and addictions are becoming increasingly common due to the high level of stress exposure during the posting period.

On one hand, many international companies underestimate the linguistic and cultural differences as far as their workforce abroad is concerned. Expats often lack a circle of close friends, family members and, in general, social ties abroad. An increased risk of disillusionment can occur, leading to intensified psychological pressure on the expat.

On the other hand, many enterprises become increasingly aware of the importance of properly preparing their employees and their accompanying families and partners for different intercultural events in order to reduce the expected culture shock, to avoid stress and reduce the risk of illness, and thereby paving the way for an overall comfortable stay abroad. Intercultural training for the expat helps to prepare for new challenges to come, such as dealing with cultural norms and values of the local population of the country of destination. Recognizing one's own values and standards and reflecting upon them lays the basis for being able to understand and accept foreign cultural phenomena which can sometimes seem quite bizarre when comparing them to one's own cultural background.

In addition to intercultural training in the home country, companies are frequently approaching experts abroad, i.e. in the respective country where the expat is scheduled to be sent later. Besides, the expat and if applicable, the accompanying family or partner, will be assisted by an expat coach on-site after a defined period of settlement. An expat coach actively supports and facilitates understanding the local culture by questioning the happenings of the new daily life, in order to evaluate them. In short, he introduces the expat into the new reality for his own benefit.

This kind of support structures the everyday life and helps to prevent loneliness, which especially affects expat family members and partners. The social well-being of expats often depends on the personal activities they engage in and how outgoing they are towards the community.

For most newcomers, international communities or Chambers of Commerce provide hands-on advice about the country, thereby playing a significant role in the establishment of the new intercultural network. Most members of the same expat community are in a similar situation, and the mother tongue is a strong connection point that can create a true feeling of togetherness. Nevertheless, permanent isolation from the local society and culture should be avoided. Alongside a solid posting preparation and the related cultural assimilation, certain language barriers and prejudices can be reduced in advance, so the newcomer is able to indulge in the new culture and fully enjoy his life in the new country.



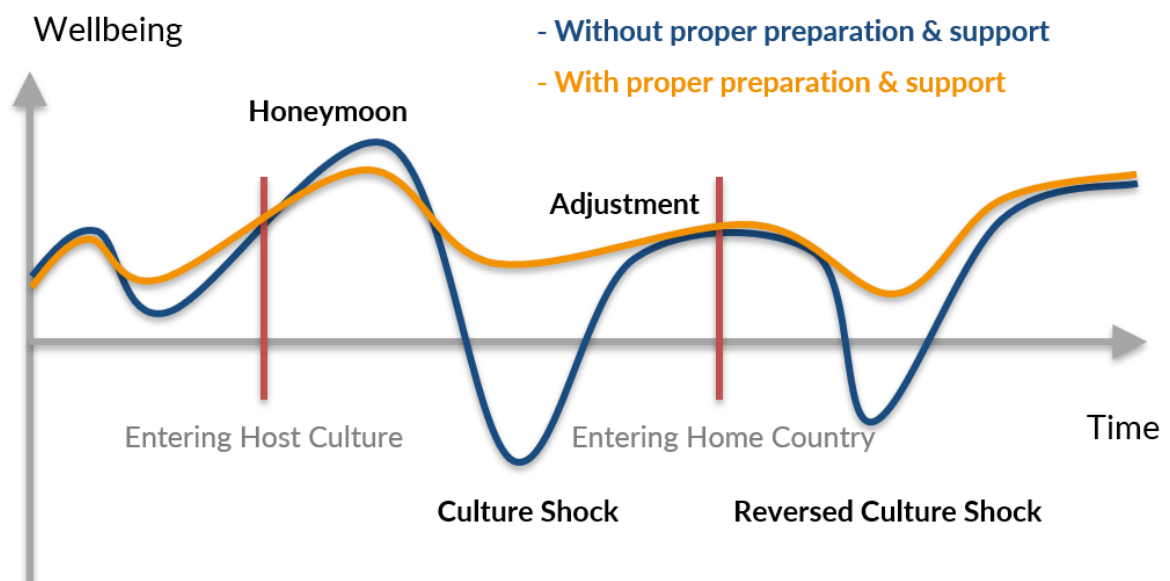
Optimized posting management reduces frustration, stress, illness and increases the level of performance

Any professional assistance for the expatriate and his family members – throughout all stages of the assignment cycle abroad – significantly reduces the impact of a culture shock on the individual and enables the early recognition of potential risks involved. In addition to the preparation for the new cultural experience, professional support in the country of destination would be most welcome, as certain specific problems and questions can often only be answered by consultants and trainers on-site. Those range from simple everyday life related topics, through tax and legal issues, to complex entrepreneurial challenges in the new environment. Targeted professional meetings for expats deliver important information and contribute to the overall business success, significantly reducing the risk of misjudgments and wrong decisions. This has a positive impact on the expat, and on the accompanying family if any, and not only on the company that initiated the posting.

Advice regarding culture shock prevention and recommended actions to be taken

- ◆ An optimal posting management of the expat during all stages of an abroad assignment considers not only cultural concerns, but also compliance risks and the overall arrangement of the process. In addition to the reintegration of the employee and his accompanying family upon return to the home country, the company should define the use of the newly acquired knowledge and the experience abroad as an integral part of the repatriation.
- ◆ The preparation for the posting abroad with support from intercultural trainers is strongly recommended. This can be achieved by participation in various seminars offered by relevant business associations and chambers in the home country.

- ◆ The direct link to consultants and intercultural trainers abroad makes the integration into the local culture much easier. Qualified consultants and trainers know best from their own experience about the usual and extraordinary challenges at home and abroad. With their know-how related to the country of destination, they represent a useful interface between those two worlds.
- ◆ Learning or improving the local language plays a significant role in the integration process and has an impact on the well-being of the individual.
- ◆ Building a social network with other expats and with the local community prevents possible isolation that may occur.
- ◆ The more intense the expat and his family have dealt with the new culture in advance, the easier it is to overcome prejudices and to see cultural differences as opportunities.
- ◆ Travel activities while residing abroad may support the integration process of the individual and present the country itself, its people and their culture from a different perspective. Life in a big city in Korea can be completely different from everyday life in the home country, especially for the expatriates coming from rural areas.



Graph: W-Model according to Oberg

The Repatriation challenge: After the culture shock comes the reversed culture shock

Once back home, many expats face the so-called reversed culture shock. They face changes that took place during their long-term absence which might cause difficulties or discomfort for them. Many of them experience to be unexpectedly in an outsider role although being at home. During their absence business processes and corporate structures have undergone their own dynamics and changed. For this reason, the reintegration should be actively managed and supported by the company. Due to insufficient repatriation measures from the social perspective, the benefits of the posting abroad can often only be fully beneficial for the company, unfortunately not for the assignee himself. That is why repatriation training should be considered to make sure the transition is smooth, especially after a longer time spent abroad. The post-move support should therefore be included in the final stage of an international assignment. To the best practices count amongst many other a career discussion before and after the assignment, HR conversations throughout the cycle, assistance for the partner to find a job at home as well as assistance for family members.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at info@nowak-partner.com.

All information is given to the best of our knowledge; however, we are not responsible for the information provided by third parties!

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We offer project management support across a wide range of areas, where commercial common sense, Korea expertise, and our reliability are winning factors. For established companies in Korea, we are a reliable ally for succeeding at difficult and unusual tasks. We provide locally adapted solutions and provide you with everything you need to make your business operations and market entry to Korea a remarkable success.

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<i>We provide customized one-stop solutions for our customers, including providing freelancers – qualified professionals – who represent your company in Korea.</i>	<i>We negotiate with Korean business partners for you and deliver professional advice regarding your joint venture or M&A endeavours.</i>	<i>We provide a shortlist of the most suitable candidates for your business objectives, leaving you to choose your preferred match.</i>
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Business Incubation	Interim Management	Team Setup
Office Search & Setup	Crisis Management	HR Assessment
Freelancer Hosting	Negotiations	HR Consulting
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