

Integration of Immigrant Labour into Workplace and Communities

Silvia Bégin¹ and Charlene Ball²

¹ 206, 53302 Range Road 261, Spruce Grove, AB T7Y 1A7; ² #301, 2908 – 105A St., Edmonton, AB T6J 4J4; **Email:** silviab@clearwave.ca; charleneball@shaw.ca

■ Introduction

The purpose of this paper is:

- to enhance cultural sensitivity; develop awareness of cultural adaptation stages; and to provide an overview of key elements for integrating foreign workers into the workplace and community. In order to effectively facilitate the integration of foreign workers into the workplace and community, we must explore the key concepts of Culture, Adaptation, and Awareness.

■ Culture

Culture can be defined as “the learned and shared values, beliefs, and behaviours of a group of interacting people” (Bennett & Bennett, 2007). This sounds simple, however, what comes to mind when we think of culture? Possibly types of food, clothing, music, language, religion, art, etc. In fact, there is much more to culture than these outward manifestations.

The concept of culture can be likened to an iceberg in that only a small part of it is visible (above the surface), while the majority is invisible, out of conscious awareness (below the surface) (Weaver, 1993, p. 157); the invisible features tend to provide the foundation from which visible aspects have arisen and rest upon.

As a starting point for integrating foreign workers into the workplace and community, we must recognize that: (1) cultural differences exist; (2) all cultures are deeply engrained in the hearts, minds and behaviours of their members; and (3) no culture is superior or inferior to any other, they are just *different*. (Adler, 1998, p. 236)

■ Adaptation

As foreign workers enter a new culture, an inevitable process of personal transition begins. It is important to note that adapting to a new culture is a “process”, not an event. In the case of foreign workers, it is mutually beneficial for hosting employers to foster a smooth transition. Cultural adaptation is, after all, about two cultures interacting with each other; and happy workers tend to be more productive workers and stay with their employer longer.

■ Awareness

Awareness on several levels is crucial to facilitating the integration of foreign workers. These include awareness of:

- Differences in cultural values and communication styles
- Your own cultural predispositions
- The process of cultural adaptation including culture shock
- Some practical strategies for fostering successful adaptation

■ Cultural Value Differences

Figure 1 identifies some key cultural value differences that employers are likely to encounter between Canadian and foreign workers. These are *broad cultural generalizations*, and represent the opposite ends of a continuum, with many variations in between. There is also variation found within every culture, so care must be taken to avoid cultural stereotyping.

Individualism/Collectivism is the core dimension present in most cultures, and tends to be closely tied to the corresponding value dimensions as shown in Figure 1. **Individualism** refers to the tendency to value individual identity, rights and needs, and “promotes self-efficiency, individual responsibilities, and personal autonomy” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 67). The key values of individualism are “freedom, honesty, social recognition, comfort, pleasure-seeking, and personal equity” (Ting-Toomey, p. 68)

Collectivism refers to the tendency to value group identity, group rights, and “in-group-oriented needs over individual wants and desires. Collectivism promotes relational interdependence, in-group harmony, and in-group collaborative spirit” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 67). The key values of collectivism are “harmony, face-saving, respect and conformity of parents’ wishes, equality

in the distribution of rewards among peers (for the sake of group harmony), and fulfillment of other's needs" (Ting-Toomey, p. 68).

Figure 1. Key Cultural Value Differences

Individualism	Collectivism
Self-reliance, independence, individual goals, personal gain, functional, individual face-saving	Family & community interdependence, group goals, relational, collective face-saving
<i>Egalitarianism</i> (low power distance) Fairness, belief in equal opportunity, informality emphasized, subordinates expect consultation	<i>Hierarchy</i> (high power distance) Power distance (seniority, age, rank, title), and formality emphasized, subordinates expect directions
<i>Competition</i> Individual achievement	<i>Cooperation</i> Group achievement
<i>Use of time</i> Time is money, focus on punctuality, efficiency, productivity, "live to work"	<i>Passage of time</i> Time is for life, focus on spontaneous expression, "work to live"
<i>Change / Future</i> Adaptability ensures survival, focus on "progress", innovation	<i>Tradition / Past</i> Stability ensures survival, focus on time-honoured & proven traditions

(Adapted from Bennett & Bennett, 2007.; Stewart, et al., 1998; Ting-Toomey, 1999)

Some countries/cultures that *tend to be individualistic* are: Canada, United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Netherlands, New Zealand, and Germany; and some countries/cultures that *tend to be collectivistic* are: Mexico, The Philippines, Guatemala, Ecuador, Taiwan/China, and Japan.

Consider the following: The employer discovers that an expensive piece of equipment has been broken due to negligence, and wants to find out who is responsible for the damage. In keeping with the collaborative spirit of collectivism, and the desire to maintain harmony and prevent a co-worker from losing face, no individual worker would be expected to admit fault in the incident, nor would it be appropriate for punitive measures to be taken. It might be most prudent in this situation for the employer to review proper operating procedures, including incident reporting, with all of the workers.

■ Perceptions

A quick perception exercise in which we are asked to describe an ambiguous looking object reveals that we tend to want to immediately interpret and assign meaning to it based on our own life experiences, before finding out what the ambiguous object really is. The purpose of the exercise is to raise awareness of *ethnocentrism*, “using one’s own set of standards and customs to judge all people, often unconsciously” (Bennett, M. J., 1998, p.26).

In order to avoid making incorrect assumptions about unfamiliar behaviour, the practice known as “**ODIS**” is recommended -

O – Observe, D – Describe, I – Interpret; S - Suspend judgment

Practicing the ODIS method increases awareness of our own cultural values and assumptions, and allows us to better understand and appreciate other cultural perspectives (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 83). With the ongoing practice of ODIS, one learns *empathy*, “the attempt to understand another person by imagining his or her *perspective*” (Bennett, 1998b); and practicing empathy can “serve to create a more sensitive and respectful climate for ... intercultural communication” (Bennett, 1998a, p. 212).

For example, if an employer were to observe that a worker has completed his/her assigned task and is now sitting around idle when there is much work left to be done, the employer might interpret this as laziness or lack of initiative. Practicing ODIS would prevent the employer from jumping to conclusions, and help him / her to look for the real reason behind the worker’s conduct. This may be as simple as respectfully asking the worker what he/she is doing. The response might be that the worker was waiting for further instructions. The hidden cultural value dimension might mean that commencing a new task independently would be disrespectful and defiant of the employer’s authority.

■ Communication

There are two types of interpersonal communication: verbal and non-verbal. It is estimated that only about 30% of what is communicated in a conversation is verbal; the remaining 70% is non-verbal (Birdwhistell, 1970).

Non-verbal communication “includes all behaviour that modifies, adds to, or substitutes for spoken or written language” such as how we use: our voice (tone, stress, speed), gestures and posture, our eyes (indicating turn-taking, threats, propositions), space (proximity), touch (frequency and nature), and time (importance of punctuality) (Bennett & Bennett, 2007, p.8).

An example of non-verbal behavior that causes frequent misunderstandings is that of “eye contact”. In some cultures, it is a sign of respect when engaged in conversation, while in other cultures, avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect, especially towards someone of higher status (elder, teacher, employer).

■ Communication Styles

As with cultural value differences, there are also contrasting communication styles. One example of this is the contrast between *Linear/Direct* communication (in which speech progresses in a straight line until reaching an explicitly stated main point) and *Circular/Indirect* communication (which proceeds in a circular pattern, providing context from which to understand the main point, which is left unstated) (Bennett & Bennett, 2007, p. 9).

The assumption of the circular / indirect style is that the listener will “get” the main point from the context provided; thus, to explicitly state the point would be condescending. By the same principle, circular/indirect speakers are likely to perceive linear/direct speakers as being too direct and ill-mannered.

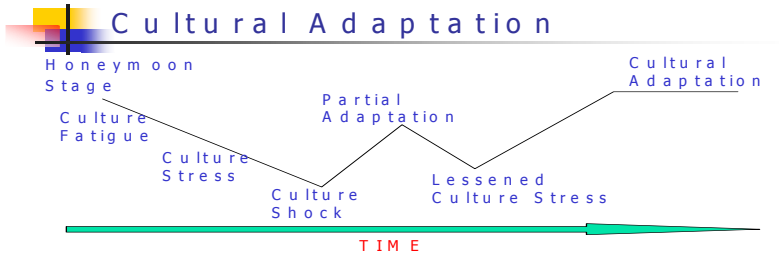
In order to minimize intercultural misunderstandings, we must:

- Understand that human behavior and communication can only be understood from their own cultural context (Adler, 1998, p. 236);
- Be mindful of what we contribute to the intercultural encounter. This means frequently asking ourselves, “What are my assumptions?”
- Developing empathy for the foreign workers by practising the ODIS, and checking your perceptions with the workers.

■ Cultural Adaptation & Culture Shock

Figure 2 is a simple representation of how cultural adaptation might evolve.

Figure 2. Cultural adaptation



Newcomers go through several stages of adaptation to a change in culture. Initially the newcomer experiences excitement over the novelty of new surroundings, this “honeymoon stage” wears out as he/she becomes burdened by cultural stress, leading to “Culture Shock”, “a state of loss and disorientation precipitated by a change in environment that requires adjustment” (Barna, 1976). It occurs as a result of the loss of familiar cues, breakdown of interpersonal communication, and identity crisis (Weaver, 1993, p. 139). To return to the iceberg analogy, “when one enters another culture, it is like two icebergs colliding - the real clash occurs beneath the water where values and thought patterns conflict” (G. Weaver, p. 159). Culture Shock is often followed by a period of partial adaptation/recovery, and additional culture shock incidents, before eventually achieving a level of sustainable cultural adaptation.

■ Recognizing Culture Shock

Symptoms of culture shock can include: headaches, dizziness, rashes, nausea, irritability, insomnia or excessive sleepiness, depression, withdrawal, paranoia, anger, aggression, hatred, fear, crying, and complaining. (L. Barna, 1976)

The single most important factor in easing the integration process for the foreign workers *will be their own awareness of the adaptation process* and of some effective coping strategies. Training and resources must be available to assist foreign workers with this process, as well as for their hosts to provide effective support. However, proactive measures taken by the employer, such as those mentioned below, will likely minimize the problems associated with the adaptation process.

■ Practical Tips For Integration Into The Workplace

Upon hiring and before departure

- Provide as much information as possible in advance *in the language(s) of the workers*, including: contract (critical), working conditions, salary, etc.; **hire a professional translation service**
- Provide some information on climate, culture, the community & region
- Provide suggestions for what to bring (type of clothing for the climate, family photos, favourite music, camera, items to remind them of home)

Orientation and training upon arrival

Employers should provide thorough training/orientation to all aspects of the workplace, and not assume that the foreign workers will know it already. Specific systems and equipment may be entirely unfamiliar to them, so it is best **not to take anything for granted**, and to **give concrete examples**, as follows:

- Fully describe the worksite, location & use of equipment, safety & emergency procedures (WHMIS, 911, First Aid training if relevant), job description, specific tasks
- **Have all important documentation, signs, operating manuals, etc. translated into the language(s) of the workers**
- Label items in the workplace – as many as possible in both languages
- Describe workplace culture - staff structure, interaction with other workers, gender roles/relations, places off limits, activities not allowed, lines of communication, dealing with conflict, use of computer/internet/e-mail
- Define working conditions - schedule, breaks, statutory holidays, probation, performance expectations/evaluation, punching time-clock, health/accident insurance, sick days (legitimate reasons for taking sick time)
- Details of remuneration - amount, how, when, vacation pay, deductions
- Prepare local workers for arrival of foreign workers - cultural awareness, expectations of local workers (patience, cooperation, support, mutual learning)

- Implement a buddy / mentor system - match local workers with foreign workers to help them learn the job and the workplace culture
- Host an informal social event - to welcome and “break the ice” between foreign and local workers, include food, drink, dance from both countries
- Show interest in your new workers - get to know workers as people, and learn how things are done in their country; this will go a long way with workers from “relational” cultures
- Extend invitations - consider inviting newcomers to a family dinner or outing Provide bilingual dictionaries in the workplace & encourage everyone to use them
- Speak slowly, use simple language; Speaking *louder* does not overcome language or cultural barriers!
- Listen patiently and attentively -- language learning takes time

■ **Practical Tips For Integration Into Community**

Geographic orientation:

- Provide maps & tourism information of town, the local region and province
- Provide a familiarization tour of the region and town
- Explain transportation and important city/town bylaws (smoking, jay-walking, seatbelts, etc.)
- Provide a driver education handbook to learn Canadian driving standards
- Provide a handbook of information about working in Canada/Alberta

Amenities:

- Medical facilities (how to access, health insurance, what they pay for - prescriptions, dental)
- Explain appropriate use of emergency, hospital out-patient department, clinic (health system and costs may be very different from home)
- Bank (open account, get debit card & PIN, hours of operation)

- Police station (introduce to & have local police talk about key law enforcement & safety issues; in many countries police are feared and not trusted)
- Grocery store (where to get best prices, variety, familiar foods)
- Post office (hours of operation, price of postage)
- Barber shop (hours, prices)
- E-mail, internet access (internet café, library, at worksite)
- Library, video store, pharmacy, etc.

Programs & Activities:

- ESL (English as a Second Language) courses - schedule & registration
- Religious services (schedule and locations)
- Recreation centre (programs, facilities, schedules, fees)
- Community events (calendar or where to find out about them)
- Social entertainment (restaurants, movie theatre, etc.)

■ Conclusion

The success of both existing and new workers will depend on how well prepared they and you are for this intercultural work experience.

Enjoy the opportunity to interact and work with individuals from different cultures. The journey, even if a bit bumpy at times, will fill you with satisfaction if both parties engage in the enriching process of mutual adaptation and learning.

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■ Additional Information

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