



Cultural Intelligence

Are women and people of color more culturally intelligent?

Cultural intelligence (CQ) refers to a person's capability to adapt effectively to new cultural contexts and, according to authors P. Christopher Earley and Soon Ang, is considered "the key factor in determining who succeeds in global work assignments."

To some extent, women and racial/ethnic minorities are inherently bicultural. The experience of growing up in a society in which you rarely see others like you in positions of power, influence and control teaches different lessons. It teaches you how to adapt.

Those who adapt successfully learn how to operate within their subcultures and within the dominant culture. Thus, if those who grew up being different have risen to middle and senior levels in corporate America, many have had to develop CQ.

With that in mind, the question becomes: Are multinational corporations overlooking some of their best talent for international assignments?

Here are some relevant facts:

- Some 83 percent of HR executives surveyed expect the number of international assignments will stay the same or increase during the next five years.
- U.S. failure rates, defined as returning early, are estimated at 20-30 percent, compared to approximately 10 percent for European and Japanese multinationals, who reportedly do a better job of selection, preparation, longer foreign assignments and developing better language skills for expats.
- In a Catalyst study, only 13 percent of U.S. managers being sent overseas were women, even though they represented 49 percent of professionals and managers.
- Stereotypes about their abilities, their willingness to accept global assignments and receptivity to them in other countries are reported as primary reasons why women are not tapped for these assignments.
- 80 percent of women surveyed had never turned down a relocation opportunity, compared to 71 percent of men.

While minority individuals generally perceive they have to work harder to overcome obstacles related to stereotypes, many would also say these experiences are invaluable. Being different from the dominant group often contributes to the development of skills that, while important in any management role, becomes much more critical in global assignments. Their life experiences often teach them to be:

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- Sensitive and perceptive to individual nonverbal cues, subtle group dynamics and organizational norms.
- Comfortable being different from everyone else.
- Respectful of others, not assuming that you are the dominant person in a relationship or group, and not overtly asserting your dominance — even if you are in the more senior position — without knowing how that will play in the environment.
- Collaborative in problem solving and conflict resolution.
- Effective in giving and receiving feedback.
- Self-aware and able to manage emotional reactions, especially anger, impatience and frustration.

There has been less research on U.S. minority groups. African Americans often receive fewer international assignments but can be the most positive about the experience and reluctant to return home. Randee Partee, a former expat for Ralston Purina in the late 1990s, said in a CareerJournal.com article: "It's the first time in your life that you're seen simply as an American and not as an African-American, and it's very freeing."

The following are some recommendations for multinational corporations dealing with this issue:

- When using cultural assessment tools to evaluate candidates for global assignments, ask if the tool's reliability and validity are solely based on white males.
- Integrate global assignments within the larger talent management process, and ensure slots for international assignments include women and people of color.
- Track the early return and success rates of expats by race/ethnicity and gender.
- Develop strategies to ensure success and retention of all expats, such as mentoring relationships, maintaining communication with expats while they are out of the U.S. and advocating for appropriate assignments upon their return. «



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