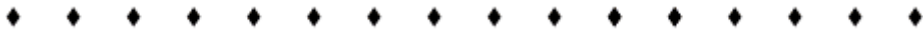




## Virtual culture trainer?

**Interactive programmes make cross-culture training available to users with an internet connection at anytime, anywhere. But, as Jennifer Hamm reports, these cutting-edge tools are unlikely to replace face-to-face instruction.**



"Strictly e-learning without any instructor-led piece has proven to be ineffective," said Carolyn Ryffel, senior manager of trainer development and curriculum design for Cendant Mobility Intercultural Services. "It seems that a blended approach is most effective."

The movement towards replacing interpersonal training with interactive learning are already being backed away from. This is, in some part, due to the realisation that individuals can have a tough time staying motivated.

Taking a blended approach to cross-culture training is more realistic, agrees Tineke Boucher, a consultant in product development with cross-culture training firm Trompenaars Hampden-Turner (THT).

"It's not 'here's the password, good luck in Hong Kong'," she said.

Providing a blended approach, Cendant Mobility has teamed up with THT to incorporate THT's well-known Culture Compass into its training programmes for traditional expatriate assignees.

Before attending Cendant's two-day training programme, expatriates and their spouses work through Culture Compass OnLine. They are introduced to some of Trompenaars' models, such as the Seven Dimensions of Culture, which explains that all cultures have different approaches to universal problems.

For example, in the external versus internal dimension, users explore the issue of to what extent do we control our environment? In the individualism versus communitarianism dimension, one looks at whether they operate in a solo manner or as a group.

The web-based Culture Compass is divided into nine sections and includes instructional text, audio and a series of question-and-answer components. In one of the Q & A sections, users complete a survey to determine their cross-culture profile based on the Seven Dimensions of Culture theory.

"What makes the Culture Compass particularly relevant to users is that it is culture neutral," said Ryffel.

The answers generate a five-page profile which is given to participants upon arriving at Cendant's training programme. There, it is used as what Ryffel calls 'an



anchor to facilitate discussions about their own values and the dimensions of the new culture that will be most relevant while on assignment'.

For one year following the training programme, expatriates and their spouses have access to the Culture Compass OnLine, which has specific information on 50 countries. Ryffel said this is important because assignees often have regional responsibilities and work in multi-national environments.

Ursula Brinkmann, founder and director of Intercultural Business Improvement, said the follow-up feature could be of value to users.

"You can self pace it. You can go back to it when you are ready," she said. "You aren't dependent on those two days."

But the key to culture training, said Brinkmann, is to create a 'psychological readiness' for encountering new cultures, approaches, values and ways of doing things.

"My job as a trainer is to make them curious, wanting them to learn more," she said. "Not to see cultural difference as a threat to who they are but as a chance to learn more about others and to learn more about themselves."

Christine Communal, a visiting fellow at Cranfield School of Management in the United Kingdom, also specialises in cross-culture training. She used the Culture Compass for several years and agrees that it is a good starting point.

"What I liked were the definitions of culture and the background of different countries," Communal said.

However, Communal does have some reservations about Culture Compass.

**Taking a blended approach to cross-culture training is more realistic... It's not 'here's the password, good luck in Hong Kong'. - Tineke Boucher**

"Respondents are permitted to review their results against a cultural database. This can be misleading since neither Fons Trompenaars nor Charles Hampden-Turner has published in the specific area of linking personality and culture," she said. "The presentations of the results in the Culture Compass leads to confusions between a psychological analysis and a cultural analysis, scientifically this is referred to as 'ecological fallacy'."

Communal now works with the Spony Profiling Model (SPM), an international profiling tool developed by Cranfield's Gilles Spony and built on the work of culture expert Geert Hofstede and cross-cultural psychologist Shalom Schwartz. For demonstrating links between personality and culture, Spony won the award for best European doctoral thesis in European Human Resource Management in 2001.



SPM users answer a series of questions that takes about 45 minutes. The questions are geared toward gaining an understanding of the participant's work motivations. In the final section, respondents are asked to list three colleagues of the same nationality to evaluate their communication style. Emails are automatically sent to the colleagues listed who then spend about 15 minutes answering questions.

"In SPM, work values and communication styles are based on the same dimensions. This enables a comparison between self-perception and perception by others," said Communal. "In other words, one can check whether the motivations apparent through personal values are also perceived through social behaviour."

The results are computed through an automated system and then reviewed in a one-on-one phone session with an accredited SPM representative.

During the review consultation, results are accessed online and start with a basic explanation of ones' work motivations. A diamond chart shows on the vertical axis whether one is more concerned with others or with self enhancement. The horizontal axis reveals a tendency towards group dynamics or individual dynamics.

These four dimensions are then further refined in a 12-dimension chart and even more specific within 36-dimension chart. In a separate section, users can then access where they fall on an intercultural map.

"It can be as big picture or as detailed as you want it," said Steven Filby, head of learning and development for e-bookers.com, who has used SPM as a tool for executives working across cultures.

Unisys, an international IT services and solutions company, began using SPM as a way to facilitate a discussion within the organisation about whether it was interested in creating a common culture or if it valued diversity.

"The thing that sold us [on the SPM] was the link between culture and personality," said Peter Charlton, EMEA Head of Leadership School at Unisys, adding that it has significant flexibility in its application capacity.

Using the SPM has been a platform for discussing culture, values and expression.

"If you want to be competitive, the manner which you might do that is very different in Sweden and North America," said Charlton, "and yet the values might be the same."



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Useful links:

Trompenaars Hampden-Turner (THT) and Culture Compass ([www.thtconsulting.com](http://www.thtconsulting.com)).

Cendant Mobility ([www.cendantmobility.com](http://www.cendantmobility.com)).

FutureToBe and Spony Profiling Model ([www.futuretobe.net](http://www.futuretobe.net)).

Intercultural Business Improvement ([www.ibinet.nl](http://www.ibinet.nl)).

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