

## **CROSSING INTERNATIONAL WATERS**

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Written documentation aimed at a global audience presents enough challenges in considering style, vocabulary, voice, and punctuation. When one is working on documentation, editing and revisions can fine-tune a draft into a finished masterpiece. However, when a person is thrown into an assignment that involves crossing international waters, being able to function in a foreign place is essential and just as important as completing that masterpiece.

Consider what happens when a person who grew up in a small southern Texas town is given a long-term assignment in New York City. The fast-paced lifestyle, different phrases and expressions, and dissimilar behavior are a few of many elements that contribute to the Texan's culture shock. While adjusting to these various differences the newcomer has the luxury of speaking the same basic language. If being transplanted to another part of the United States can result in culture shock, imagine a long-term assignment in another country.

### **Living Overseas**

- Research the country and city of destination. Learn about the country's culture by talking to others, reading travel books, or finding information over the internet. A better understanding of the country and its people lead to an easier acclimation into a new environment. In addition, knowing more about a culture and its people is helpful in the workplace.
- For a long-term assignment, register with the American Embassy. Once the American Embassy has information on the person and the assignment, the Embassy can be a valuable support system if the need arises. For example, Embassy contacts can provide information about where to find food stores, hospitals, and other businesses in the destination area.
- Learn the general rules and laws of the country. For example, hospitals in Venezuela do not accept United States Medicare/Medicaid health insurance coverage. Because of this, most medical facilities in Venezuela require cash payment before any services or treatments are administered. In even more rare cases, a hospital may have mandated that the patient or an outside party acquire the resources (drugs, some medical equipment) for treatment.

### **Working With Other Cultures**

- Always show respect to others. Although signs of respect vary across cultures, sticking with basic formal and professional behavior is a good way to avert awkward situations. For instance, avoid addressing people on a first-name basis until it is clear that a more casual and informal rapport is acceptable to the other party.
- Avoid using slang words and phrases. Schools overseas that teach English use proper English. Staying away from slang terms decreases the chance of accidentally offending or insulting someone whose culture gives a similar word a different meaning. Additionally, use of improper English will slow down communication in general and can inhibit production.
- Be careful with sense of humor. There is a world of difference between joking about a project or something in the industry and joking about a person or inappropriate content. What may seem funny to co-workers at home who share the same sense of humor may be insulting or disrespectful to someone from a different culture.

While the idea of an overseas assignment can be intimidating and scary, the opportunity to travel to different places is a gift. There are an unlimited number of sights, sounds, and tastes waiting to be discovered. People can experience them through living in new places or learning them through people of other cultures. Don't be quick to dismiss trying new things and learning about other beliefs, even if they differ from the norm. The potential to add to an already vast life experience is immeasurable.

*Nancy Codoner grew up overseas until she was 12 years old; her family lived in Asia, the Middle East, and South America. She attended the University of Connecticut and graduated with a bachelor's degree in Environmental Science and Writing. She taught environmental science for some time, and then became an account executive for an environmental information company. She can be reached at [ncondor@care2.com](mailto:ncondor@care2.com).*