

YOUR WORK-PLACEMENT PROVIDER: EXPECTATIONS AND BEHAVIOUR (Typical Phases)

ERMES

ENHANCING
RESOURCES FOR
MOBILITY
EXPERIENCES AND
STRATEGIES

Colophon

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EXPERIENCES ABROAD: THE TYPICAL PHASE

Anyone considering a prolonged stay abroad must undertake an articulated itinerary to guarantee the success of the initiative. Work, work placement, study or volunteer service may be different in terms of objectives and implementation, but they are all inserted in a general framework determined by well-defined teaming.

Adapting to living and working conditions in another country is an extremely complex process, which can be measured on the basis of the level of comfort, well being and satisfaction encountered in the hosting context, the ability to manage daily situations and the success of interaction and integration with citizens of the country of adoption and with your own environment of activity.

Adapting successfully to a new culture does not mean abandoning your own culture and the sense of belonging to your country. The ideal form of integration consists of learning and adopting the culture and patterns of behaviour of the citizens of the host country while maintaining your own.

The “expatriate”, namely a person who moves abroad, must be aware of the obstacles that he/she has to overcome and there are many challenges to meet. Many of these are foreseeable and their solution can be anticipated with adequate preparation. But there are still obstacles and sudden and unforeseen challenges, which arise in the situation and that you have to deal with, using your intuition and following the motto: “*trying will do no harm*”.

Preparation in “problem solving”, which helps people find answers and the right type of behaviour when faced with difficulties that could arise at the workplace, or even prevent them from arising, should be acquired in advance. It takes time to measure yourself against the host country, to take care of everything required from the bureaucratic standpoint, to make the contacts required for integration, to avoid missing deadlines. Depending on the activity to undertake, the right timing for this is 3, 5 or even 12 months prior to your departure.

Problem solving in 5 steps

1. Define the problems
2. Identify the ideas
3. Analyse
4. Name the solution
5. Apply the solution

Having success does not limit you to the fact of performing a well-defined activity abroad. The path starts at home, with preparation, and starts again when you end your experience abroad. During each of these phases, you will probably experience different feelings, characterised by moments of euphoria, but also of fear. In a theoretical model, the entire itinerary could be summarised in 10 different emotional states.

1. Resolution 2. Fear of departure 3. Initial enthusiasm (“honeymoon”)	PREPARATION
4. Psychological adjustment 5. Adaptation crisis (“cultural shock”) 6. Adaptation / re-integration 7. Fear of going home	SOJOURN ABROAD
8. Enthusiasm for returning 9. Crisis of readjustment 10. Readjustment	RE-INTEGRATION

1. Resolution

Finally, the decision to leave, to realise a dream nourished for a long time, has been made.

You have evaluated all the pro’s and con’s from every angle.

You have consulted your family, friends and “experts”, who have first-hand experienced of what it means to move abroad.

These confrontations have fed your enthusiasm and you finally have a clear idea and are fully convinced on your departure.

The idea of leaving home and the desire to set out on an adventure support the decision you have made.

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But ... these feelings will not last until your departure, because you usually start feeling... . .

2. Fear of departure

There are many practical problems to solve: lodging, travel, contract, etc. and you will probably feel a strong emotional stress.

Despite in depth preparation, many doubts remain, especially when you don't know the country where you are going to live.

In this phase, it is important to have a systematic approach, to find a prompt answer for every doubt, starting from fundamental questions, like:

- What do I really expect from this experience?
- What parameters should I use to verify whether I have reached my goal or not?
- What factors limit my field of action?
- Who can help me when I get there?

The answers to these questions will again provide clarity and define the priority objectives to reach during the experience abroad and, consequently, the details will gradually become clear.

If, as far as the expectations are concerned, we replied "to live in close contact with persons from the place, but to be completely free to move about", your lodging can be neither in a family or in a mini-apartment, but must be in a shared apartment or in a student lodging facility.

A limiting factor for your action in the working environment could be your future colleagues. In this case, you will try to establish positive relations even before you start working.

It is extremely useful to have contact with people who have lived in the country of destination. This could take place through the employer, who sends the expatriate on a mission or through frequenting the community (virtual and actual) of nationals or professionals who already live there.

The more information you obtained on the country of destination, the less fearful of departure you will be. Detailed information in terms of the contract, fiscal system, social security and career opportunities help you to understand better your situation in another cultural context.

Training on cultural adaptation in general and on specific aspects of the country of destination (history, culture, climate, demographic aspects, economy, educational and political systems, commercial practices and social customs) provides a solid basis that keeps the fear of departure under control.

Following all of this reasoning and activity, most of the organisational problems will have found a solution. The state of stress has been considerably lowered and you have simultaneously acquired emotional security, which can be further stabilised through a brief visit to the future country of adoption, which will enable you to verify first hand the ideas you have developed during preparation, establishing contacts with people who are important for the realisation of the activity abroad, getting acquainted with the new living conditions and organising some practical aspect, such as your lodging and instruction of your children, or visiting agencies that provide useful information in the event of transfers abroad.

3. Initial enthusiasm: the “honeymoon”

Upon arrival everything seems new and fascinating. When you leave home the daily “boredom” and all the negative reasons (dissatisfaction, desire for change, blockage of your career, etc.), which are often the decisive triggering elements that allow you to make the decision to depart, the various problems and difficulties that invariably emerge in organising your new life (from furnishing your lodging to shopping for groceries) or integration into the new reality (getting to know new people, overcoming bureaucratic problems), do not cause excessive disturbance.

The sensation of vacation dominates things and any problems that crop up are solved with good humour and patience. The welcome you receive on the part of new colleagues and neighbours is cordial. When your duties are assigned, even if they reflect what you did at home, they are interesting and stimulating. Relations with the people you meet in your leisure time, at the pub, at the sport club, through the invitations of colleagues and neighbours, are superficial and therefore there are not conflicts and harmony seems to reign.

4. Psychological adjustment

You can see more clearly now and you’re not blinded by the initial connotation of a vacation. You start to get acquainted with the organisational rules of your place of work, which are often similar to those you experienced at home. Like everywhere, there are conflicts even in the new environment. They are due to the hierarchy, the abilities and, increasingly, on the incapability of colleagues and on envy.

As social contacts increase even outside the workplace, you start to perceive the differences in the mentality, feelings and behaviour, between the host country and the cultural standards acquired at home. So problems of a practical and psychological nature arise, which cause negative feelings. You understand that Italy is not the only place where there are things that don’t function properly:

lines in front of offices, late trains, incorrect or incomplete information on fulfilments of the law and so forth.

This phase of “realisation” of the reality is followed by... .

5. Crisis of adaptation

“Cultural shock” takes place in this phase. The difference in the language, in cultural concepts, values and symbols cause confusion and anger. You begin to have doubts about your adequacy with respect to your surrounding environment. You may have a drop in self-esteem, because in spite of your good command of the language, you have not succeeded in fully participating in decisions in the various ambits of work and life. You feel exploited by the people who surround you, obliged to make compromises that are almost always experienced as a defeat.

So you begin to have sensations of anxiousness, insecurity and frustration towards the host culture, which provokes a permanent state of tension. This stress complicates social relations and your performance at work, sometimes even jeopardising your health.

You have nostalgia about home and any difficulties in adapting (for example to the food, standards of hygiene, the climate and the daily rhythm) can act as the catalysts of problems.

In this phase you may feel isolated and on the defensive, making comparisons between the country of adoption and your own country, always to the disadvantage of the former.

In the case of a couple or a family, all of the components experience this situation of discomfort, especially if the efforts to organise daily life and the responsibility to create a new social environment all completely on the shoulders of the non-working partner. If this person is obliged to renounce to exercising his/her own profession and must limit his/her activities to the home and management of the family, he or she can quickly reach a considerable degree of frustration, because he/she lacks external confirmation, which has negative spin off even on the relationship of the couple.

Other factors that can weigh upon the phase of cultural shock may concern lowering the duties of the person at their job in the host country, with respect to what they did in their country of origin. A clear definition of the period of time it is intended to remain abroad and a strong motivation may, however, prevent the insurgence of this problem, or keep it at very reduced levels.

Cultural shock, however, is not something that takes place automatically. Rather, it depends upon the individual’s preparation: knowledge and experience already acquired on the culture of the host country, similarities with your own culture and the extension of the social network are ideal “shock absorbers”, which permit the individual to avoid the sensation of disorientation after the initial enthusiasm has passed.

The objectives set for the initial period abroad should not be too high. It is preferable to move forward at a slow pace, posing many intermediate objectives, which may seem to have little

importance, but which, together, increase resistance to stress. This process of planning with appropriate timing, for example, setting the objective of studying a foreign language or the subject of an examination to pass, or for progress in work performance, an evaluation interview with your supervisor, for getting to know neighbours, an invitation for a visit and so forth.

In this phase, relatives and friends at home are fundamentally important to “blow off steam” and receive consolation in difficult situations; they are a continuous source of encouragement to find the strength to get away from the state of cultural shock.

The duration of this phase also depends on the measures of preparation developed by the individual. It could be quite short if there have been previous experiences and if, before departing, a 360° analysis was made of the host country and the obstacles to overcome. In other cases, on the other hand, it could take several months to succeed in finding a dimension of “being at ease” in the host country.

6. Adaptation

After positive elaboration of cultural shock, there is the phase of acculturation, namely the phase in which the expatriate has understood the rules of the game in the host country and of the institutions that are pertinent in his or her life and is fully able to apply them.

- a. **Assimilation** means that the rules of the host country are entirely adopted, renouncing almost completely to those of one’s original culture.
- b. If the adaptation takes place in a superficial manner as a necessary element to satisfy professional requirements, there is a strategy of **separation**, where interaction with the host country and people are avoided, denying the culture and living in an enclave, where values, symbols and rituals of one’s country of origin are kept alive.
- c. For **integration** between the culture of origin and the culture of the host country, it is necessary for there to be great interest on both sides. A new cosmopolitan identity is developed, which permits the expatriate to strike a balance between the requirements originating from the two cultures. Critical reflection on cultural standards translate into the choice of positive and useful characteristics and leads to an intercultural process of learning on the part of the individual and on the part of the social environment of the host country. One of the consequences of this process is the creation of international networks that can remain active for a long time.
- d. The expatriate is **marginalized**, instead, when there is no reason to build a social network, or when this is not possible due to external conditions and when the roots of the culture of origin

are weak. The consequences are isolation and the sensation of being a person without a country. This is a typical situation of emigrants who did not leave their country voluntarily.

Which strategy is realised depends only partially on the individual, inasmuch as, in addition to the personal requirements (language, flexibility, experience and expectations, motivation), the cultural, work and social factors of both countries come into play.

The condition *sine qua non* for positive integration is mental aperture and esteem towards the host country, in addition to an environment that is willing to accept a person from another place. Stereotypes and prejudices hinder the birth of a sense of trust, which is the point of departure for true integration.

There are three indicators to evaluate the level of success of the adaptation:

- subjective satisfaction with your living and working conditions,
- the quality of social relations,
- level of achievement of professional objectives set.

If you have succeeded in adapting to the host culture, serenity will return to everyday life, the expatriate has become “operational”, and reaches the objectives set, recovering his self-confidence. The positive results of the sojourn abroad will now reach their highest point. Confirmation and success will not be lacking in professional and private life.

But since an experience abroad is an option with a definite time of expiration, the successive phase of the return home will rise on the horizon before long.

7. Fear of going home

When you begin to see the end of the work or completion of the period of training abroad, your first fears regarding your manner of re-entry to your life “afterwards” begin to come to the fore.

Can you go home and occupy the position you occupied before you left? Can you make a step up in your career?

Will you have to conduct another battle to achieve an interesting position?

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Do your contacts with colleagues and your personal contacts still exist?

Does the university recognise the experience gained?

Have you got time to prepare for the examinations foreseen?

How have you and your friends changed in this period?

What does this mean for your erstwhile social networks?

You will be asking yourself some practical questions at this time as well: how will you organise your move back home? Is your old apartment or house still available or will you have to find new lodging? You will have to think about a possible change in your standard of living as well: for example, if you were sent on a mission by the company, you could afford to hire domestic help, which will be too costly at home.

These uncertainties and fears, however, will be overcome gradually and substituted by a positive approach to the new phase of life.

8. Enthusiasm for the return

As soon as you arrive back home, you will probably experience a phase of great enthusiasm: you will see everything with new eyes, you will no longer have to renounce to so many things that are dear to you. Your joy at seeing relatives and friends again is deep. The experience you have had is at the centre of attention of your social network.

In a word: you experience a new “honeymoon”, this time with your own country, which is in many cases, however, followed by an unexpected crisis.

9. Crisis of readjustment upon return

The period spent outside your own country has changed you, especially if you have lived in a country that is culturally different from your own and you have assimilated or successfully integrated with the host culture. Consequently you have changed not only with respect to your lifestyle, but also with respect to your system of values, while the social at home has not changed or has gone in a different direction than his.

This could cause a feeling of diversity from persons who are close, who demonstrate no real interest for the expatriate’s new knowledge and experience, after the initial curiosity has subsided.

In particular, they are not willing to accept his new vision of the world and things, which is the result of an amalgamation of two cultures and of another way of organising work and life. The expatriate receives a moment of cordial attention, but usually his advice is not taken seriously, or encounters mistrust and envy on the part of persons above him in the hierarchy, colleagues, family or friends, because it creates turmoil in tried and tested rhythm and behaviour.

After the initial enthusiasm has worn off, normal life returns with its small and great flights of anger. You miss pleasant habits acquired in the host country. You may feel nostalgia for the foreign country, which will probably remain for the rest of your life. The differences in company organisation characterised by different rules and hierarchies from the ones experienced abroad, can create difficulties in relations with supervisors and colleagues.

The seriousness of the “re-entry” shock depends on various factors: previous experiences, personal factors such as the ease in making and maintaining social contacts, age and self-awareness.

Keeping private and professional contacts alive during your stay abroad is the best method to reintegrate quickly and without friction. Another way is to stay abreast of social, economic and political events at home, in step with possible changes in the company's organisational and social structure.

10. Readjustment

This, too, is a phase that is realised step by step.

Those who integrated successfully abroad have enhanced the ability to use new ways of reasoning, feeling and acting.

Often, the expatriate who left for reasons of work, once back in his own country, does not go back to the same position he had before his departure, but chooses a job or company that valorises the baggage of experience acquired, utilising it to the best advantage to favour the development of his own organisational structure. Career prospects may be much higher than in the previous context of his job, thanks to the intercultural competence gained.

In particular, for young people and after their first experience, readjustment often takes concrete form in the choice of a specific educational or working itinerary: an experience abroad has enabled him to understand his preferences perfectly.

In many cases, the expatriate retains the desire to depart again. For example, after having undergone a period of academic study abroad and completed the cycle of education at home, the idea of experimenting in the world of work abroad comes naturally. Otherwise, departing on a new mission abroad after a few years of work at home is a new, fascinating challenge.

Many people, however, "flee" again, because their homeland and its requirements are perceived as foreign and hostile.

One reason for this may be that a change has taken place in their system of values during their permanence abroad, leading to a sort of devaluation of their own cultural background, accompanied by the full assimilation of the host culture.

Again, there may have been an "idealisation" of the homeland, which, when you are abroad, translates into "ghetto" and which, when you return home, prevents you from adapting to the real world.

And the things you had hoped for and foreseen did not materialise: recognition of the experience gained in the world of work. In many realities, the expatriate is too qualified or inspires a sensation of fear due to his ability to see the world in a different way.

Example of table to measure the success of a sojourn abroad.

OBJECTIVE	INDICATOR	QUANTIFICATION or DESCRIPTION	MEASUREMENT	ACTIVITY
Personal objectives for learning (language, international experience, intercultural competence)	Fluent command of the language	Write a report without errors, and give a presentation without errors	1 month prior to start of sojourn abroad, evaluation by a "native speaker".	Intensive course, 2 hrs per week with teacher in the host country Objective not achieved: intensify learning
Objectives of personal maturity (openness, clarity in personal priorities, potential and limits)				
Objectives relative to the quality of life (living conditions, family/friends, leisure time, honorary appointment)				
Objectives concerning networking (acquire friends, professional contacts)	Create a network of friends in the new country.	Receive invitations to go out together.		

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Career objectives (CV, usability, economic aspects)	Enrich CV	Greater independence in duties	Received appointment from supervisor	Request appointment with supervisor to propose candidacy
Objectives of performance (conclusion of project, performance, certificate/diploma)	Know how to use new professional software	Virtual planning in collaboration with colleagues.		Attend internal refresher course

If it is not possible to identify a “clear” indicator for some objectives, choose a precise description that permits understanding even after a period of time has elapsed. The purpose of this card is only to compare objectives and actual results, but it should also provide indications to make corrections in the event of non-achievement.