

# Conference coverage: let go of cultural perceptions for success



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BREUKELEN, The Netherlands □ "Businesses can□t be separated from people and their cultural environment," said Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich, managing partner of Frankfurt-based CONSULTus GmbH.

Van Swol-Ulbrich's upbeat presentation at Expatica HR's "Best Practices for Managing Your International Workforce", held at the Universiteit Nyenrode on 21 November, raised awareness of the intangible aspect of culture and had attendees examining their own cultural programming.

Despite culture being fundamental for success in the international business arena, van Swol □Ulbrich believes it may be the component most overlooked by expatriates in their preparations for working abroad.

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□Even geographical proximity doesn□t mean you don□t need to do some training to improve cultural sensitivity,□ she said pointing out that surface similarities, in language as much as in behaviour, can be especially misleading.

Being aware of our own values is a vital part of the training process,□ she pointed out, □It can help you use the right words.□ Also vital is learning the unwritten rules of the destination culture.

As globalisation accelerates, so the importance of style-switching skills in a multicultural environment increases. Van Swol □Ulbrich put forward solid research showing that multicultural groups working successfully together can be the most effective teams □ if the people are the right mix □ or highly ineffective if the people

cannot overcome cultural differences. The performance of single cultural groups tends to remain average.

Research also revealed that what HR personnel perceived as the most valuable qualities in members of a team differed significantly from what the team members themselves considered the most valuable qualities in fellow members ([see lists below for details](#)).

Some useful tips van Swol-Ulbrich offered: try to select the "right" person for the job through diagnosing individual strengths and weaknesses in relation to the destination culture, explore your own corporate culture and include all company members in the cultural learning process (including stakeholders), and have a long-term plan for short-term needs.

*Natasha Gunn*

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### **Priorities listed by HR Managers**

1. Professional qualification
2. Personality
3. Language skills
4. Stress resistance
5. Professional experience
6. Familiar with corporate culture
7. Communication skills

### **Priorities listed by team members**

1. Behavioural flexibility
2. Openmindedness
3. Language skills
4. Achievement oriented
5. Empathy

6. Communication skills

7. Ambiguity tolerance

*Source: Wirth , Merkert 1994*