



INTERCULTURALITY

an American in Europe

An American who is given a new assignment or a new contract – like all active employees – is often faced with the tangible issue of interculturality. Many companies are sensitive to the issue and do not abandon their employees. Helen Bannigan, an expert in intercultural communication and a resident of Hong Kong, came to the VITIS LIFE offices to meet Nicholas Nesson, General Manager Corporate Communications at KBL epb. According to them, listening and using common sense are the keys to effective communication between cultures.

Why did you leave the United States and how were you received on your travels?

H.B.: It was 25 years ago, near New York City. I had just been fired, the lease on my apartment had expired and my father had recently passed away. He spoke six European languages and often told us about the exciting experiences he'd had living and working on the Old Continent. After travelling by myself for a year, I decided to continue my studies in France and prepared to enter Sciences Po. I found the French academic community very welcoming but with a healthy dose of competitive spirit. In the decades that followed I lived in Portugal, Spain and Italy, and now in Hong Kong. I've found that each country was welcoming in its own way.



N.N.: As for me, I grew up in Boston. At 18 I went to live in Australia for a year, where I taught in a boarding school and coached the basketball team. Then I spent a year in Calcutta, where I worked in one of Mother Teresa's hospices. I also travelled in China quite a bit. At the end of my studies in Boston and Montreal, life led me to Paris, Dubai and then Luxembourg where I've been living since early 2013. Regarding the welcome, it depended on the country, the size of the city, the language... In Europe **if you're friendly, everything's great.**

On the scale of integration, from anti-culture (refusal of any adaptation) to completely acculturated (forgetting one's nationality), where do you stand?

H.B.: The ideal is a balance between these two extremes.

It is important to adapt to the host country; **to respect people and their culture. But knowing how to keep your own cultural identity is also important.** I don't use the word "root" because I do not feel rooted as such. I am rooted in my values, which are a mixture between those of countries where I have lived and the experiences I've had. Regarding my place on the scale of integration, I do a bit of back and forth, a little in the middle, depending on life's circumstances..

N.N.: This reminds me of the immigrants who came to America and who kept their language at the beginning, but insisted that their children speak English. I am more aware of my children's position on this continuum. I have two daughters who were very young when we left France. Their mother is French, which gives them an education in that nationality. In Dubai, things were so different that they lost this characteristic. For them, America means the summer holidays, the beach. And I think, ultimately, they are convinced of being American much more than I. They speak English and a bit of Arabic. At the moment they go to a bilingual school in Luxembourg. Maybe their French side will return to the surface?

Speaking several languages can cause information overload, a certain complexity or lack of finesse in each language. This can make things difficult.

H.B.: Our two children were born outside the United States. We speak English at home, but they are in a French/Italian bilingual school and I use these languages at work, plus Spanish and Portuguese. We are therefore a very multilingual family. This gives you a much broader perspective of the world; it really opens a window onto the systems and beliefs of other cultures.

It gives you a distinct advantage when it comes to creating meaningful relationships in life, and helps you to succeed in business. When a child is born outside the culture of at least one parent, there is the term "Third Culture Kid". My children have been practising meditation since they were eight (I've been doing it for 20 years) and it has been very helpful in integrating this third culture and for living a life more rooted in the present. They have always been my greatest teachers. We have developed an entire system of family values that are a reflection of the life we have chosen: focused on harmony, respect and gratitude. As parents, we strive to demonstrate these values and encourage our children to do the same.

N.N.: I'll send you my daughters! No harmony, no respect...
[laughs]

Being connected to what is important is extremely positive when it comes to intercultural exchange.

N.N.: I came from Dubai, where 90% of the population is foreign. I think that openness to many different cultures and an aptitude to integrate different cultural points of view is, if not the future, it is the present at any rate. The great strength of the United States is the ability to synthesise cultures. My grandparents came from Russia. In the United States, and also increasingly in cities in Europe, **almost everyone comes from somewhere else.** As a company, to succeed you have to consider the world as a whole: both the phenomenon of emerging countries and the tilting of the global balance. China has a very uniform culture without any kind of melting pot: in fifteen years, it will be the world's largest economy. India knows how global mechanisms work and operates within them successfully. It owes its global appeal to one thing: the understanding that if you want to work in a call centre in Bangalore, you need **a name that Americans can pronounce.** At the same time, what the world needs to learn is how to talk to Ravi or Gunjan, in India, who in fact is the consultant of the future. Europe, meanwhile, is becoming increasingly insular.

H.B.: Some companies do not understand this. I would say that Anglo-Saxon companies too often arrive in a new market and act in their own way, thinking that their approach is the most effective in the world. Once we take on the mentality that Nicholas has just explained, we can succeed dramatically. The company VITIS LIFE, based in Luxembourg, is at the heart of all of this. It doesn't just understand the development that we have just mentioned, but also the regulatory, political and economic environment of all the countries in which it operates.



At the same time it knows how to respect local value systems, which in today's world is a prerequisite for lasting success.

**How do you use this globalist knowledge in your job?
What is essential when communicating corporate image?**

N.N.: KBL European Private Bankers currently operates in Europe, but in the future it intends to expand into the Middle East and Asia. As a communications professional I see skills that **are transferable regardless of where you are**. In fact, Saudi Arabia is basically not so different from Europe when we apply our common sense. It is essential to make contact with people and to show them that you are **listening**. Of course, knowing the markets, cultures, human expectations, the media and the regulations of another country is a plus (a cultural background is useful), but if you can ask simple questions such as, **"tell me, what do you do?"** or "what's your country like?" and then **listen to the answers and take them into consideration**, you have at your fingertips a great tool for intercultural communication.

H.B.: I manage a specialist public relations agency, Bannigan Communications. We help companies raise their profiles in numerous countries at once. We have partner agencies in dozens of countries around the world. Our clients' visibility is enhanced by these agencies. This is the reason I came to VITIS LIFE. I listen to the client, make sure that their expectations are realistic, then I listen to my public relations partners: "This is what the client wants, but in France you have to proceed differently according to local cultural sensitivities." **I act as a genuine communication facilitator**, and provide guidance on how to communicate and behave most effectively given the cultural contexts. One example: in Rome I was constantly being interrupted and it irritated the New Yorker in

me, "But I was talking first!" An Italian colleague told me, "We aren't interrupting you, we're interacting with you." Italians are passionate about what you say; if they don't say anything, it is because they are indifferent. In Asia on the other hand, silence usually means that what you are saying is being respectfully considered.

**We've been in the era of new technologies
for more than twenty years. What role
do they play in intercultural communication?**

N.N.: When I was a student, there was no internet, no email, no social networks... Yet we still communicated. New technologies sometimes **make us miss essential things**. We know a lot about everything, but also everything about nothing. In this sense, I am against the smartphone for human contact. At the same time, unlike green technology (non-existent in Dubai, impressive in Germany or Luxembourg), new technologies are basically the only thing on which everyone agrees. **Divisive, but useful**. Without them, the revolutions across the world today would not have happened. When there is no press freedom, they allow **others to understand what is happening**.

H.B.: New technologies are helping to connect the world, without any geographical or cultural difference. However, we need to remain vigilant. On the one hand, we've got 2,000 friends on Facebook. On the other, as we get older we realise that what matters most is connecting with others in a meaningful and authentic way. Obviously the internet can facilitate this. But ultimately, the best way to build a long-term relationship regardless of location or technology is to base it on mutually respectful dialogue and to master **the art of attentive listening**.