

Being international requires more than just wanderlust. Whether you're encountering members of a foreign culture on a sightseeing trek, or applying for a professional position abroad, it's your international skills that will set you apart from the crowd. This article describes what skills internationally-focused recruiters are looking for, and what it takes to succeed abroad in a multicultural team. Start building your International IQ today –while at school and by going abroad!

## Your International IQ

Just imagine yourself in a few years looking for an international job, applying to study abroad, or selling your skills as an international intern. Below are four categories outlining how international people are different. These insights will help you understand what international recruiters are looking for and will help you learn how to join the ranks of those working and living abroad.

- **Political, economic and geographic knowledge:** Imagine a dinner conversation taking place around a table in a lush garden terrace — in your temporary home in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. Your seven guests are from France, Belgium, the US, and Burkina. The expatriate conversation is rich in world politics, economics, and geography. The conversation is lively and intellectual. (Even if you are on a beach drinking beer in Thailand, you'll find yourself engaged in worldly conversations with other travellers.) You enjoy the dialogue, and you know these conversations are so much better than the typical North American conversation about weather, neighbours, or the costs of housing renovations. People with high International IQs can converse intelligently about international news, world events, and multiple countries and their ethnicities. To become an international person, start traveling and read world politics and learn geography. Your first test question: How many countries are there on Earth?
- **Knowledge about the international aspects of your field:** There is an international aspect to every field of work, to every area of study, to each and every field of interest. If you are going to go international, you have to develop a good knowledge of the international aspects of your area of expertise. Know which organizations work internationally in your field, what the types of jobs are, and what aspects of your work have an international application. Knowing how your specialization is practiced in an international setting allows you to focus your education, job research, networking contacts, and your discussions with peers on landing the right job for you abroad. A bit of research will uncover the international aspects of your area of expertise: look for the umbrella organizations, the web sites, the trade magazines, and international conferences in your field. Your first challenge: talk to people in your field who have worked overseas to find out what skills they have and how they broke into working internationally.
- **Cross-cultural knowledge and skills:** Do you know when to burp at a table and when to hold it in? Can you figure out how close to stand next to a stranger in an elevator or while holding a conversation at a cocktail party? Can you tell that someone is being polite when they agree to your proposal, but that they will not follow through? International people have the cross-cultural skills and knowledge to be effective in another culture. They study the country's belief systems, modes of behaviour, and attitudes before they arrive. International people are like cross-cultural detectives. If they are thrust into an unfamiliar culture or meet someone with an ethnicity they have never encountered before, they will be sensitive and skilful; they will quickly display the appropriate cross-cultural traits required to make any new relationship work. Their skills are portable and can be carried from country to country, place to place, and culture to culture. The ability to utter a few words in the local language is important to those living there. Your first assignment: Acquire these skills at home by seeking out people from other cultures, becoming active in cross-cultural groups, and learning a second or third language.
- **Personal coping and adapting skills:** Can you deal with change? Can you deal with having to eat soup each morning for breakfast, as they do in some parts of India, instead of sitting down to cereal? Can you sleep in a room with a humming fan, a stifling mosquito net, and the constant noise of goats and chickens just outside your bedroom window? How about being so overwhelmed with a continuous stream of well-meaning visitors – so many that you fake the need for prayer time just to have two hours alone? These are just a few of the numerous cross-cultural challenges that require so many small adjustments

that you may think at times that you are going mad. With practice and insight you can improve your personal coping and adaptation skills to help you deal with culture shock. People who enjoy living and working overseas are adaptable and tend to embrace challenges. You will face changes in culture, friends, work, climate, and food. Therefore, having a sense of adventure, as well as humour, curiosity, and a great deal of patience, is invaluable. To prepare yourself, you can do volunteer work or become active in organizations which put you in contact with other cultures, either in your home country, or by visiting a country where the culture is radically different from your own. Your test question: Do you like change? Your ability to enjoy change may be the single biggest factor in assessing your suitability for work and life abroad.

## Summary of Skills for Succeeding Abroad

This list of characteristics will help you assess your suitability for overseas work and assist you in preparing to live in a foreign environment. Self-knowledge is power in today's job market. When you understand your skills and career objectives and have a professional self-assessment of your cross-cultural work skills you will be much more effective and focused when dealing with international recruiters.

- **General traits:** enjoyment of change, desire for challenge, having street smarts, sense of adventure, open mindedness, patience, and curiosity
- **Adaptation and coping skills:** emotional stability and ability to deal with personal stress, understanding of culture shock, receptivity, flexibility, humour, and self-knowledge
- **Intercultural communication skills:** tolerance, sensitivity, listening and observing skills, nonverbal communication skills, and second language speaking skills
- **Work-effectiveness traits and skills abroad:** independence and self-discipline, training experience, resourcefulness, versatility in work, persistence, organizational and people skills, leadership, energy, a calm demeanour, project planning skills, writing skills, verbal communication skills, diligence and dedication, loyalty, diplomacy and tact, and a philosophical commitment to your field of work

## General Traits

- **Enjoyment of change:** Do you adapt well to new situations? If you get upset when you find your toothpaste on the wrong shelf, chances are that life abroad is not for you. Change can be frightening for even the most daring people, but you must learn to embrace and enjoy it.
- **Desire for a challenge:** Every activity can seem like a challenge in a foreign environment. Do you enjoy overcoming difficulties to achieve a goal? Do you remain cheerful in almost any situation? If so, you'll succeed abroad.
- **Street smarts:** Working and living abroad is all about interacting with new people, but there's a fine line between being open to new things and putting yourself at risk. Do you know what steps to take to avoid being a victim? Are you cool-headed when things go wrong?
- **Sense of adventure:** Going abroad involves navigating uncharted waters – and having a sense of adventure is important. Don't exaggerate your taste for adventure in interviews with potential employers, but present yourself as someone who enjoys tackling unknowns.
- **Open mind:** An open mind is a basic ingredient for succeeding in an international environment. Be aware that the North American way of doing things isn't always the best way. Stay open to new ideas and perspectives.
- **Patience:** It is perfectly natural to feel out of place and slightly confused in new surroundings. It takes time to adjust to a new culture and going with the flow is the best approach. Stay patient and observant and you'll soon feel more at home.
- **Curiosity:** Curiosity can help you appreciate, understand and learn from virtually any situation. Don't leave home without it!

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## Adaptation and Coping Skills:

- **Emotional stability:** Emotional stability is critical for work abroad. Employers are wary of applicants who are going abroad to “get away” or those who are overly reliant on family and friends.
- **Understanding of culture shock:** Any serious international job hunter knows about culture shock. Do you recognize the symptoms? Understanding culture shock will help you adjust and may even allow you to help others.
- **Receptivity:** The successful international employee can observe social customs and cultural norms in his or her new culture, and adapt accordingly. Depending on where you are stationed, adhering to social customs can be extremely important.
- **Flexibility:** When you go abroad, leave your ego at home. Never assume that the North American way is the “right” way. Flexibility will make you more likely to succeed, and it will make your experience abroad more enjoyable.
- **Humor:** A sense of humor is invaluable abroad, in both personal and professional contexts. The ability to see the lighter side of things can make the difference between enduring the adaptation process and actually enjoying it.
- **Self-knowledge:** Succeeding abroad depends on understanding fully. Assess your need for space, alone time and the comforts of home. Know your limits! Nothing can be gained by pretending to be something you’re not.

## Intercultural Communication Skills:

- **Tolerance:** You may find cultural norms abroad frustrating, inefficient or impolite, but don’t pass judgment. Always assume a cultural basis for anything you don’t understand, and endeavor to learn from the differences.
- **Sensitivity:** Be sensitive in your dealings with others. Try to see situations from all sides. Often there is a simple cultural explanation for behavior that may at first seem frustrating or odd.
- **Listening and observing skills:** Your eyes and ears can teach you the most about a new culture. Observe people and then ask tactful questions of your hosts and other expats. Remember: keen observation is the key to good intercultural communication.
- **Non-verbal communication skills:** So much of our communication is non-verbal. Being observant will help you become acquainted with foreign body language and its meaning.
- **Second language skills:** A working knowledge of the local language is often crucial to effective intercultural communication. Even knowing a few phrases will help – if only by showing that you have made an effort.

## International Work Traits and Skills:

- **Independence and self-discipline:** An international posting may be far removed from head office supervision. In many cases, you work totally on your own or with just one level of supervision. To thrive in these conditions, you must be independent and self-disciplined.
- **Training experience:** The *raison d’être* for most expat jobs is to aid in the transfer of expertise to local workers; and a project’s long-term success depends on effective training models. Be sure to foreground any training experience on your CV.
- **Resourcefulness:** While working abroad, you’ll likely have to solve problems without guidance and without the benefit of previous experience. Resourcefulness is about being imaginative, determined and flexible.
- **Versatility in work:** Many international jobs require you to work independently, and you’ll have an advantage if you possess a wide range of skills. This is especially true in developing nations, where everything from negotiation to car repair can prove useful.
- **Persistence:** In a culture you don’t understand, it’s easy to believe there’s no solution to a problem. Don’t become cynical! Persistence and positive thinking are your best friends.

- **Organization and people skills:** These two important skill sets are discussed in *Interviewing for an International Job*. Visit this section to get inspiration and start building your skills.
- **Leadership:** Be aware that norms of leadership, management and discipline differ hugely across cultures. Your ability to lead effectively abroad will depend on your understanding of local customs.
- **Energy:** If you’re going to be a successful international worker, you’ll need energy to overcome cynicism, frustration and exhaustion. Those who thrive on challenges are most successful.
- **Calm demeanor:** In most cultures, emphasis is placed on maintaining a calm, stoic composure rather than showing emotion. The ability to remain cool-headed in stressful situations is essential for success in work abroad.
- **Project planning skills:** As most international work is based on implementing projects, it is important to understand the fundamentals of project management. Do you know how to break a project down into phases? Can you write a project plan?
- **Writing skills:** Most jobs abroad demand good writing skills, as extensive report writing is often required. Be aware that North American students (even graduate students) often have poorer writing skills than college-educated professionals elsewhere in the world, and certainly in comparison with Europe. Always strive to improve.
- **Verbal communication skills:** As a representative of your institution abroad, you will meet many people and even be called upon to speak publicly. Many societies cultivate the art of conversation to a greater extent than we do; Westerners are often at a disadvantage in this respect. Be as polite and articulate as possible while abroad.
- **Diligence and dedication:** Because of its inherent challenges, work abroad requires a high degree of dedication. You might need to be willing to undergo discomfort or take unusual measures. Ask yourself if that’s a commitment you’re willing to make.
- **Loyalty:** International employers demand greater loyalty than domestic employers. Terms of employment may place restrictions on your behavior, both at work and in social situations. Keep the lines of communication with your employer open, and be prepared to compromise.
- **Diplomacy and tact:** “Think before you speak” is a good idiom to keep in mind while abroad. Take care to observe customs and levels of formality and, above all, be tactful at all times!
- **Philosophical commitment to your field:** Most international employers are looking for employees who are committed to a broader cause, rather than just earning a paycheck. Learn how to describe your passion without seeming overzealous.

## A Last Word

International recruiters are looking for people who are different: people with a high International IQ. By carefully assessing your own international skills and traits against the cross-cultural blocks of skills described in this article, you can compile a strong skills inventory and convey these qualities to recruiters. Keep your international skills inventory in mind when applying as a volunteer or intern abroad, for international scholarships, or for full-time work abroad. If you can professionally explain that you have a high International IQ, your next assignment abroad will be just a flight away!

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