

**DON'T JUST BLEND IN:  
Getting the Right Mix of Intercultural Learning Technologies is  
Critical to Global Success...but not Easy.**

By Dean Foster

Technology, as we all know, provides us with the opportunity for faster and more widespread communication of information, and, as it does in all areas of business life, plays its role in learning, development and training too, mainly by advancing learning across time and space. Both interactive and passive web-based learning permits fast and widespread communication of information, and if this information happens to be cross-cultural in nature, then web-based technology can become an effective tool for providing cross-cultural information speedily and ubiquitously.

The key words here, however, are “speedily” and “ubiquitously”, and if those were the only criteria that learning, training and development had to meet, web-based technology would be, hands-down, the only training technology to use. And admittedly, some information, some kinds of learning, require little more than the efficient downloading of quantitative facts and data, a learning scenario perfectly made for web-based technology. Successful cross-cultural learning and the development of global effectiveness skills, however, require the satisfaction of a complex mix of criteria, not just speed and bandwidth throughout the organization.

Just as cross-cultural training has evolved from a way of raising awareness to the “problems” inherent in working across any particular culture to a more sophisticated intervention that helps people to leverage global cultural differences to the organization’s benefit, so the learning technologies for the delivery of this information have also evolved, from traditional “classroom-type” face-to-face, paper-and-pencil-type training, to including a variety of web- and technology-based tools and information. A good thing, in that some kinds of cross-cultural information and skills-development can be advanced across time and space more efficiently via computers. But not the only thing. In fact, if we apply the more sophisticated criteria required by today’s advanced cross-cultural and global effectiveness training, computer and web-based training becomes just one among many possible interventions, many others of which, in fact, achieve more critically important criteria much more effectively.

## So, Just What are the Important Criteria for Successful “Global Effectiveness” Training and Development?

For starters, it should be recognized that in today's *post*-global world (yes, folks, it is way beyond just being “global”), it's not enough to just talk about “learning” cross-cultural facts. Today, I prefer to speak not just about “cross-cultural” or “intercultural” training or learning, but rather the development of “*global effectiveness skills*”. Much of what is considered cross-cultural training today is designed to provide cultural information to individuals and their families who may be relocating to a new host country abroad, and to individuals and their teams who may be working with and in particular countries abroad. In either case, in today's *post*-global, multicultural world, information limited to explaining the traditional behaviors (as defined, incidentally, through research that was conducted in the *pre*-global world!) of a particular culture is of limited use: in reality, relocating assignees work and live in very global environments (living in most cases in major, multicultural international cities, interacting with headquarters and offices in other countries, most likely with multicultural staff), and individuals and teams working together are usually strewn across a multitude of cultures and time-zones. Rather than focusing on traditional culture-specific information, “global effectiveness training” should provide that and then so much more: a larger “global mindset consciousness”, an understanding of the dynamics of effective multicultural teamwork, an appreciation for how globalization reshapes the fundamentals of traditional cultural values and behaviors, an ability to work 24/7 with non-absolutes, constant “grey”, uncertainty, ambivalence, relativity, no matter which specific culture one needs to succeed in or with. This means that, philosophically, the goals of cross-cultural training need to shift away from focusing on merely overcoming differences to leveraging those differences to the benefit of all, from accumulating limited and culture-specific data to the development of new complex, subtle and very personally effective global behavioral skills.

The goal, in fact, should not merely be to access and download cultural facts, on the level of an awareness of “do's and don't's”, but rather, to be able to implement new and effective behaviors that work across *all* the cultures involved in one's life and work abroad. And this needs to be done on two levels: both individually (“what do *I* need to do in order to accomplish my work and life goals abroad?”), as well as organizationally (“what does the *organization* need to do in order to accomplish its global goals?”). Global effectiveness must occur on these two levels: on the *individual* level in order to achieve *tactical*

goals, and on the *organizational* level, in order to achieve *strategic* goals. It is not enough for individuals and their families being relocated abroad to develop their global effectiveness without the organization also doing its part: without organizational global effectiveness skills, we're developing conditions for tactical success in a strategic vacuum, which will ultimately leave globally skilled individuals unsupported and unsuccessful. Today, the entire organization needs to have these skills, everyone involved in global work - and that means everyone from the administrative assistant answering phone calls from abroad to the managers implementing global projects with global teams, to the executive board creating global strategy - so that offices abroad working with international assignees also know how to interact with the assignee's culture positively and effectively, and so that tactical, individual efforts line up with strategic, organizational goals. The values and best practices of all the parts of the global machine must be able to be communicated, shared, understood and valued by all the parts of the global machine.

Finally, these global effectiveness skills need to be constantly honed and refined. We have come to realize that the effective implementation of cross-cultural knowledge is not the result of a one-time event, a two-day cross-cultural training program, but rather is a process of constant learning, reflection, refinement, re-grouping and re-application. Therefore, effective global skills development must also support this on-going process, and cannot be just a one-time event. This requires both training AND coaching.

### **Well, How Do We Train and Coach People and Organizations to Develop this Global Effectiveness?**

Through a variety of interventions, using all the tools available. However, the criteria outlined above require more than just the speedy and ubiquitous sharing of cognitive information among many people in many places. The above criteria also requires interventions that allow people to qualitatively change their individual and organizational behaviors, and accomplishing that requires far more than computer-based training. While computer-based tools enable the quick and ubiquitous exchange of some limited cultural information, real development of far more important global effectiveness skills requires an emphasis on behavioral training that is best and most efficiently administered in a trainer-led learning environment that enables on-going interactive training and coaching of a kind not possible with passive web-based tools. Those seeking economies-of-scale, of spreading as much quantitative pre-global cultural data to as many

people as quickly as possible, will certainly be able to achieve that goal through technology, but what will be achieved without trainer-led training is the most limited and basic kind of cultural training available, with a growing irrelevancy to the real needs of a global organization operating in the post-global world. Trainer-led, classroom-type training usually includes all the learning points that technology-based training provide, and then goes so much further to addressing the more compelling issues outlined above. So, if one is to receive technology-based training without trainer-led classroom training, they lose out on all the learning required for true global effectiveness; however, if one receives trainer-led classroom training, they inevitably get all the learning points included in the technology-based learning, but then go on to the so much more important learning outlined above. Therefore, “blending” technology with trainer-led training, while intuitively appealing at first, on closer look, is really redundant for those getting trainer-led training, and not enough for those just getting technology.

### **A Cost or an Investment?**

Additionally, the possibility of cost-savings held out by technology is of limited benefit if the information being provided is of limited applicability; in fact, the cost, though lower than trainer-led training, may simply not be worth it at any savings. At the same time, the return on the not-insignificant investment required for relevant and compelling trainer-led classroom training, being an important investment in the development of real global skills, needs to be guaranteed and made available to as many as possible as cost-effectively as possible. Within this paradox lies the real question: how to, with speed, ubiquity, and cost-effectiveness, provide meaningful, compelling and valid trainer-led global effectiveness skills training? That is the question. And yes, there is an answer. And no, as we saw above, it's not blending.

### **Beyond Blending: Trainer-led Classes and Coaching**

If the greatest cross-cultural need, both individually (tactically) and organizationally (strategically), is the on-going development of appropriate behavioral skills, based on an understanding of *post*-global (read: non-traditional, real-time, right now) cross-cultural phenomena, then trainer-led training is far more effective than technology-based information. And trainer-led training can be delivered both in traditional on-site classroom format as well as virtually, enabling us to realize both effectiveness AND cost-savings. The problem with most

web-based cultural training is not that it is web-based, but that it is not trainer-directed. Most technology is passive, whether on the web or on a CD, as opposed to being real-time with a trainer, and that is the problem, not that it is on the web. The question is not technology OR the classroom, but rather whether the training is trainer-directed (which can be done virtually or on-site) or technologically passive and private.

It is important to state that while there are clear advantages to having all participants on-site at the same time, the disadvantages - as long as the training is trainer-directed and not a passive instrument - are minimal compared with the advantages gained. And since successful global effectiveness training must also be on-going, and not a one-time event, "cultural coaching", or the periodic, planned and structured opportunity for an individual to work personally with a professional "cultural coach" toward the implementation and achievement of their global goals, is a second requirement. Cultural coaching, as well as cultural training, can also be done virtually or on-site: here, as well, the issue is not classroom OR technology, but rather, is the coaching truly coach-directed (preferred), or a passive, technology-based instrument? (not so good).

### **Beyond Blending: Hi-Tech AND Hi-Touch**

The opportunities for learning and development presented by the web are vast, but when it comes to meeting the criteria for successful global effectiveness, the web works only when it enables trainer- (or coach-) directed training. If an organization is to "blend" technology and classroom, it must not replace a tool for the trainer. You CAN have both meaningful and effective global effectiveness training, with speed and ubiquity, for everyone at every level, but to meet the real requirements of a globally effective organization in the post-global world, it must be trainer-driven, whether in the classroom or on the web. And it must be on-going, integrated with a follow-up coaching plan (either virtual or in on-site meetings) for all individuals in the organization with global responsibilities.

So don't just "blend-in": That's so 20<sup>th</sup>-century, and so limiting. Get the best of both with trainer-directed "global effectiveness training", both in the classroom and on the web. Which means you will need to evaluate the competencies of the global effectiveness program you are buying and the trainers who deliver it for you, but that's another article (hang in there for the next installment, coming soon!).

