

The Skills That Global Cosmopolitans Bring to the Table



By [Linda Brimm](#) , INSEAD

Professionals versed in several cultures have an exceptional ability to learn from experience.

We would all agree that the reputation of globalisation has seen better days. As nationalist movements emerge in more and more countries, there is mounting scepticism towards global professionals whose cultural affiliations cut across borders, even continents.

However, global business is here to stay, whether proud nationalists like it or not. There are simply too many opportunities to be captured outside the corporate home base. And the technology that enables our increasingly networked world is only becoming more advanced and accessible.

As I explore in my new book, [The Global Cosmopolitan Mindset](#), professionals versed in several cultures – whom I call “Global Cosmopolitans” – possess a rare, tremendously valuable perspective. Well-practiced at

integrating ideas and behavioural norms from their various home cultures, they are natural learners and opportunity-spotters.

Global Cosmopolitans are also proficient at building bridges between contexts, which includes helping organisations adapt to new markets. But even after they have slaked their wanderlust and decided to settle down in one place, the learning-oriented mindset they have developed will serve them (and their organisations) in good stead.

This is because their life and work experiences, played out against a backdrop of uncommon complexity and change, have left them with an array of highly applicable skills. Their skillset, or “toolkit”, acts as an ideal complement to the mindset mentioned above. The mindset directs their attention and orientation to problems; the skillset defines their problem-solving approach.

Below, I list ten of the most characteristic skills in the Global Cosmopolitan toolkit. Keep in mind that it is not a checklist: Capacities will vary in proportion from person to person and very few professionals will have all of them. Further, I am not arguing that these skills are restricted to Global Cosmopolitans. But Global Cosmopolitans are more likely to excel at one or several of them than the average monocultural professional.

Cognitive flexibility

Research in neuroscience supports the idea that operating in different languages and cultures increases cognitive complexity. This is key to generate creative solutions to challenging problems.

Global Cosmopolitans have greater cognitive flexibility, which allows them to alter their previous beliefs, thoughts or habits to address radically changing situations. Their ability to draw on knowledge learnt in a different context enables them to see new patterns and solutions and to develop strategies in the face of new and unexpected conditions. In short, they understand that truth is not an absolute; it changes depending on the cultural context.

Adaptive capacity

Global Cosmopolitans have a better understanding of their own resilience. Having been through major transitions, they develop the ability to adapt. They trust their own competence in turning a crisis into an opportunity.

The danger here, particularly for those who started their global journey very young, is that the process of adapting to new environments becomes too seamless. When this happens, they may fail to see or articulate what they have learnt so others can benefit. They may also become so reliant on their power of adaptation that they downplay their uniqueness.

Knowing what they don't know, and how to find out

While Global Cosmopolitans understand how destabilising change can be, they become skilled at assessing what they know, what they thought they knew but no longer do and what they need to find out. This capacity is invaluable not only for personal development, but also for helping others cope with uncertainty.

Reinvention

Global Cosmopolitans are not only flexible, they are capable of reinvention. This ability gives them a can-do attitude when driving change and can help them guide their colleagues or mentees to think outside the box. A Romanian general manager I spoke to during my research told me:

"I have a history of reinventing myself when I move countries and work environments. I am a pro at knowing who I need to be to feel grounded and what can change. This gives me an opportunity to see myself evolve and stretches my sense of what I think I can do."

Cross-border collaboration

When managing multiple cross-country networks, Global Cosmopolitans learn to collaborate and maintain relationships with diverse people in different time zones and cultures. They pick up the art of nurturing remote relationships – and know when a phone call, email, Skype session or in-person visit is needed.

As they mature and their cross-border skills develop, they become better able to admit when they need help, which is often the key to success.

Relational understanding, competence and respect for difference

People who live global lives learn to grasp the invisible rules and norms that govern relationships across cultures. They develop the ability to show humility and empathy and become highly observant. This relational

awareness and competence help them forge successful relationships with diverse sets of people.

‘Kaleidoscopic’ and ‘peripheral’ vision

Global Cosmopolitans have the ability to view people, organisations and issues from a wider angle. This ‘peripheral’ vision allows them to assess situations from different viewpoints and incorporate the broader context into their understanding.

Their kaleidoscopic vision also enables them to view change as an opportunity. They know how a small change can fundamentally alter an issue.

Inside-out and outside-in vision

Being simultaneously insiders and outsiders, Global Cosmopolitans learn to fully engage in a given context while retaining the ability to step back and observe the situation in a dispassionate manner.

In the workplace, they interpret – literally and figuratively – the needs of both home and foreign operations. They know whom to ask to get answers and master the finer points of doing business. This dual vision is becoming more significant as organisations recognise the important role these ‘boundary spanners’ play in global organisations.

Risk taking

Global Cosmopolitans are risk takers. Their experiences give them greater confidence in their capacity to cope with and understand any situation. Their optimism overcomes their sense of fear, which allows them to look at change through the lens of possibility rather than challenge.

Complex decision making and change management

Having led lives of uncommon complexity and built a CV full of international professional experiences, Global Cosmopolitans can make difficult decisions and manage circumstances of great uncertainty.

The storytelling challenges of Global Cosmopolitans

Again, the above list is not meant to be comprehensive. It is a mere sampling of the skills Global Cosmopolitans use to navigate the challenges that they

so often transform into personal and professional opportunities.

A difficulty arises, however, when they are called upon to verbalise their strengths, as their skillset has become as much a part of them as the experiences that formed it. That is why Global Cosmopolitans are not always the best at telling their story. They often need well-networked mentors and advocates to aid their climb within the organisation. Companies that make this effort will be better able to retain Global Cosmopolitans and benefit from their immensely valuable gifts.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/skills-global-cosmopolitans-bring-table>

About the author(s)

Linda Brimm is an INSEAD Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour.

About the research

"[The Global Cosmopolitan Mindset: Lessons from the New Global Leaders](#)" is published by Springer.

About the series

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

In the wake of the tragic death of George Floyd in the United States and protests in over 60 countries, global attention to DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) has experienced a long-overdue resurgence. As the need for more inclusive forms of leadership and culture becomes apparent, we focus here on the informed perspectives of INSEAD experts focusing on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and their intersections. These thought leaders -- both faculty and their close collaborators with rich experience in practice -- inform understanding of how to develop DEI and address identified DEI development needs.

Download the free Knowledge App

