The internationalised workplace: Connecting international employees with their local colleagues

The Danish workplace is becoming more and more international. Not only has the number of foreign employees living and working in Denmark increased over the past few years, there is also a significant number of commuters crossing the border every day to go to their workplace in Denmark. In total, more than 350,000 employees in Denmark come from other countries. How can we integrate these foreign employees into our workplace, and make full use of their knowledge and skills? A local host is one solution.

Breaking out of the expat bubble

In some countries, it is more difficult to make local friends than in others. The annual survey by InterNations, a worldwide network for expats, shows the Scandinavian countries to be the most difficult in which to find friends. Denmark is only beaten by Sweden in this respect. In fact, taking various aspects such as friendliness and language into account, Denmark is the hardest out of 65 countries to settle into. Part of the explanation lies with a workplace culture that is different from other countries. The Danish Chamber of Commerce, in a report on the experiences of expats in Denmark published in 2010, concluded “The Danes and other Scandinavian cultures tend to be less spontaneous and are less likely to ‘pop by’ than people in other countries might be.” Outside of work, Danes usually socialize with friends or family or engage in sports or hobbies. They do not socialise as much with their colleagues – apart from office social activities like the sommerfest and the julefrokost – as some other cultures where it is more common to go out with colleagues after work. This, combined with the fact that many Danes commute to and from work – especially on Sjælland, also contributes to the difficulty foreigners have in connecting with locals.
Most of the friends I’ve made here are foreigners. It’s difficult to break into any foreign society, I think. Difficult to get past the point of just being an acquaintance rather than a friend.”

British expat in the Netherlands

Connecting with a local host

One way to break out of this expat bubble is to connect expats with a buddy or local host. Initiatives such as the Copenhagen Host Program and Odense Host Program have been created in more and more places in Denmark and abroad. Research shows many positive effects are gained by connecting expats with host country nationals. During my Ph.D. in the Netherlands, I conducted a study where expats were put in touch with a local host for a period of nine months. During this time, they did all kinds of activities together, ranging from dinner or drinks to visits to the city of Gouda, or attending a Shakespeare festival. This contact made it easier for the expats to get used to interacting with the Dutch, and they also learned about Dutch culture. It was also a way for them to build their social network; quite a few participants established long-term friendships with their host. Many expats find that it is not that easy to meet the Dutch outside of work, and having a local host prevented a feeling of disappointment from negatively impacting their feelings about the Netherlands.

“But if you have that family contact, you go bowling or whatever, where you see normal Dutch people interacting, I think you get a different perspective of their cultures, not to see the negatives that you see here by yourself.”

American expat in the Netherlands

A local host within the organization

In the previously mentioned programs, the local host was someone outside of the workplace, which is likely to have more impact in the private domain. At the moment, a new project is running within the Faculty of Business and Social Sciences of the University of Southern Denmark, where international employees are matched to a local colleague. This project is funded by Udlændinge, Integrations, og Boligministeriet in a call for projects that help better welcome and retain highly educated international employees to Denmark. Helping international employees settle in by supporting them in establishing a new social network will also help retain them, since a good social network is one of the four main factors influencing whether expats stay in Denmark.

The Danes and other Scandinavian cultures tend to be less spontaneous and are less likely to ‘pop by’ than people in other countries might be

The international employees at SDU are matched to a local colleague outside their direct work environment (for example, their research group). The first results show benefits similar to having a local host outside of work, but with additional work-related benefits. The contact with the local colleague increased the social network at work, and participants also exchanged information about the workplace; for example, about cultural codes, but also about pay and bonuses in Denmark. The local hosts benefited as well by this expansion of their social network and by learning about another culture, but also by feeling good about being a “go-to person” and making a difference. Some also improved their English language skills.

“Yeah, just talking five minutes that means a lot […]. It contributes immensely to one’s work life and everyday life.”

Danish local host

Setting up a local host system

A local host system is relatively easy to set up, since participants are all volunteers. There are no costs involved unless one decides to encourage the participants to meet up, such as by organising a social event or giving out lunch vouchers. There are several aspects to take into consideration when setting up such a system.

First, it is important to decide how to set up the program. Within one organisation, one can match an international employee with a close colleague who can offer information that is the most relevant to the job, but also with someone further away in the organisation with whom one can discuss issues one would rather not talk about with a direct colleague. Another choice is whether the local colleague is a Dane, or whether they can also be other international colleagues who have been in Denmark for a while. While contact with Danes has particular advantages in terms of learning about the culture and breaking out of the expat bubble, other international employees can also offer valuable support by being ‘in the same boat’.

“If you’re not sure how it’s going to come together with your group or wherever you’re working, it is nice to have somebody else to whom you can say: ‘Oh, what does this mean?’… If you don’t want to talk about it in your own work group.”

American expat in Denmark
Second, it is important to decide how to frame the contact in terms of what the participants will expect. In my Ph.D. study, I left it to the participants to decide what they preferred to do, and only gave them examples of possible activities. This led to some participants exploring the Netherlands where others decided to mainly socialise over drinks or dinner. Another option is to be more specific in terms of what you would like the participants to focus on. An example of this is the Copenhagen and Odense Host Program, which distinguishes between a Career host for an introduction to the educational system or the job market, and a Culture host who focuses on the cultural life and the local community.

Third, when matching international employees with a local host, you have to make sure there is some common ground on which to build the relationship. It is very difficult to predict what will make people ‘click’, but working for the same organisation provides a good starting point. Other matching criteria can be where one lives, age, gender, and whether one has a partner and/or children. The good news is that even if the match does not really work out, no harm is done. My Ph.D. research showed that those with lower quality contact with their host still benefited from the contact, although, of course, not as much as the majority (64%) who established a high quality contact with their host. 

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i) This group includes 252,541 persons with a different nationality who lived and worked in Denmark (both full-time and part-time) in 2016 as well as 98,726 commuters who did not live in Denmark (www.jobinsats.dk).

ii) The Expat Insider can be found at www.internations.org/expat-insider/

iii) Danish Chamber of Commerce (2010). Living and working in Denmark: An Expat Perspective


v) The project at SDU is called Breaking out of the Expat Bubble, www.sdu.dk/bubble

vi) Styrelsen for International Rekruttering og Integration (SIRI) http://uim.dk/siri