

In Touch with the Dutch

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In Touch with the Dutch

Working abroad may seem like a dream come true, yet it should not be forgotten that expatriates face many challenges while establishing a new life in unfamiliar surroundings. For expatriates and companies alike, the assignment must be successful - if not, the consequences could be high direct and indirect costs, at the expense of the future global business of the company, or causing disappointment and a loss of self-esteem for the expatriate him or herself. Establishing timely contact with a local host can help make the transition easier.

From Congo to the Netherlands

Expats can meet other expats through one of the many expatriate associations in The Hague, Amsterdam or Rotterdam. However, research shows that it is important to break out of the 'expat bubble' and meet locals who can provide information about the host culture. *In Touch with the Dutch*, a longitudinal study of the impact of a local host on the success of the expatriate assignment, demonstrated that putting expatriates and their partners in touch with a Dutch host made their assignments easier. However, we all know this is not always easy. In fact, the 2010 Expatriate Explorer survey of HSBC found that the Netherlands was at the bottom of the list when it came to making local friends, according to the expats themselves.

Philippe and Pascale Lays are an example of a couple who met a Dutch host at the beginning of their stay in the Netherlands, now more than four years ago. Their passport indicates that they are Belgian, but they grew up in Africa and travelled around the world for Philippe's job as a petroleum geologist - living in Zaire, Singapore, Australia, Uganda, Libya, Angola, France, Kuwait, Congo and since 2008, the Netherlands. A wish to connect with the locals led them to participate in *In Touch with the Dutch*. As Pascale says: "When we came back from Congo, I found myself feeling a bit alone here. I wanted to meet people".

Benefits of Having a Dutch Host

Having a local host has several advantages. First, a local host can contribute to the comfort expatriates and partners feel when interacting with nationals from the host country - in this case the Dutch. It also helps them acquire knowledge about the Dutch culture and the country itself. "Thanks to our hosts, we discovered the Netherlands," says Philippe. For

them, this discovery included Gouda, Katwijk, Keukenhof, a Japanese garden, and several dinners and walks. Philippe remarks: "We spent some good times together".

Second, it has been shown that expats who enjoy the assistance of a host receive more social support from locals than expats without a host. Social support is a crucial resource when coping with the stress of an international assignment, yet in a new country it is largely absent, as expats leave their social network behind when moving to another country. This study showed that a local host could fill at least part of this gap.

Third, expats who enjoy the support of a host have been demonstrated to maintain their initial level of open-mindedness and proactiveness when it comes to social initiatives, compared to those who do not have a host. Even though they might come to the Netherlands with an open mind, ready to establish a life here and make contact with the Dutch, those without a host find the reality of life in a new country more difficult than expected. Contact with a local host can counteract this, helping them to 'see the Dutch differently'.

The study also found that one third of the expats who had a host maintained this contact for more than two years, as did Philippe and Pascale Lays. They have recently moved on to their next posting, Uganda, where their Dutch hosts will soon be visiting them. Philippe comments: "Despite the fact that we left the Netherlands more than a year ago, we are still in touch with them as we have become very good friends."

What Made it Work?

The study showed that expats who have a strong bond with their host benefited more from having a host than those

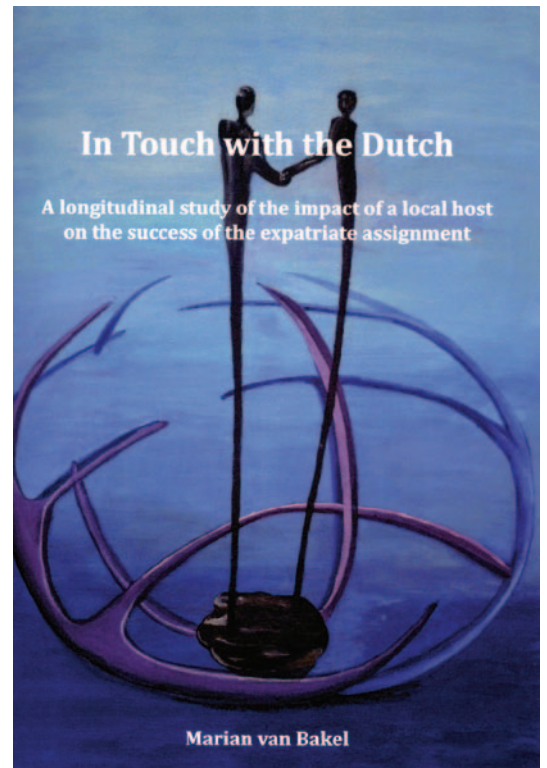
whose bond was less strong - though even this bond was better than having no host at all. All in all, this goes to show that arranging a local host is a low-risk HRM intervention.

Philippe and Pascale Lays gave the contact with their host a 9 on a scale of 1 (not positive) to 10 (very positive). Why did they hit it off? The analyses suggest that it is worthwhile to establish some similarity between participants, although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly which aspects are essential. Similar interests seem to be conducive to a 'click' because they provide common ground to establish the relationship. One example of a common ground would be to find a host who has also lived abroad or travelled extensively. Philippe says: "I think it worked because they had also been abroad. They have an open mind and know what it is like to change countries".

'Un Petit Plus'

The findings of the study suggest that contact with a local host is not a cure-all for all the difficulties faced by expatriates and partners on international assignments, but that it might be particularly useful, for example, for expatriates who have to deal with host national colleagues and clients on a day to-day basis. Philippe and Pascale Lays are pleased to have met their Dutch hosts. As Philippe remarks: "If you go somewhere and you leave without having met the locals, somewhere along the line you say to yourself that you missed something. Having a local host *c'est un petit plus.*"

Would you like to know more? Go to www.ru.nl/cvp/onderzoek/bakel_van_marian/ or contact Marian van Bakel via m.v.bakel@let.ru.nl.



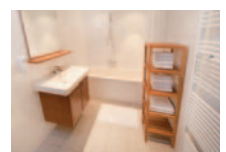
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