



Understanding 'cultural intelligence'

When it comes to recruiting, the value of emotional intelligence, or 'EQ', is well understood in our industry. But the cultural equivalent, 'CQ', is becoming just as important, writes Jan Tonkin, president of the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers.

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is the capability to relate and work effectively in culturally diverse situations. Characteristics of high CQ include the curiosity to learn about other cultures, keen observation of behaviours and interactions, and mindfulness of one's own behaviour and its effect on others.

Cultural intelligence starts at home, with awareness of our own culture's nuances. Thinking about how others see us is a great basis for helping others navigate our culture when they visit, and reminding us how carefully we need to plan when it's our turn to work offshore.

Even neighbours who seem similar on the surface have their own subtle cultural differences. Every Antipodean knows that while Australia and New Zealand are close cousins, they have different personalities – and that comes out in the way they approach business. The same is true for neighbouring countries in other regions.

Listening and building relationships at the outset can save many a faux pas. We might

need to take extra care to observe the correct levels of formality, to make special effort to supply a 'no-surprises' agenda, or to solve problems with a greater level of tact. It might be necessary to plan more face-to-face meetings, because in-person attendance carries far more social and cultural weight than written or remote communication. In some countries, segmenting marketing campaigns for different audiences might be vital due to the way decision-making hierarchies are structured.

Accommodating different daily rhythms and customs also shows respect and forms a great foundation for a co-operative approach with local industry partners. There may be different expectations regarding typical schedules – later morning session starts and dinner times, for example – or a more fluid approach to timetabling. Planning around the observance of religious rituals such as prayer and fasting can make all the difference to your participants' experience.

Taking the time to understand why our overseas colleagues behave a certain way

or expect certain things gives us a far better basis for communication. We might want every detail ticked off a month prior, and worry that the offshore venue manager doesn't have the same sense of urgency. It feels as though they don't care, when it's just a different way of working: they'll make us their top priority when it's our turn, closer to our conference date.

We might think specifying 'morning tea' on a run sheet is straightforward. But while in Asia Pacific one might expect a variety of teas, coffee and food items, in other regions this might be interpreted as simply a cup of tea – no more, no less. As always, clear communication and careful planning at the start are crucial.

Helping our clients embrace cultural differences is all part of our fascinating role as PCOs. That means cultural intelligence is just as important a quality among meeting professionals as EQ. How employers define CQ – and how candidates demonstrate it – will continue to change the face of recruitment. **CTM**