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Are you sure it is just a language problem?

*Italian and American professional experiences:
what is the key to successful cultural integration?*

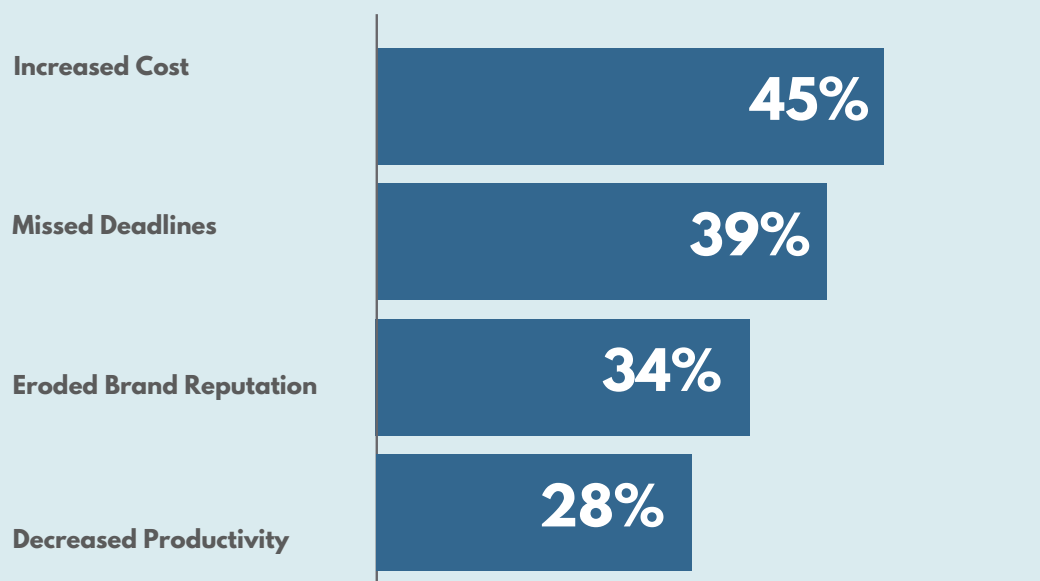




The backbone of the business is broken.

“The backbone of the business is broken” was the subheading of a study carried out by Grammarly and Harris Poll on a group of 251 American business leaders and 1001 employees. It aimed to identify the causes of *low productivity, little collaboration, and difficulty in achieving results* in the era of hybrid work.

Based on the assumption that communication is the backbone of a business, the study has shown the cost of ineffective communication for companies.



Source: The State of Business Communication, Harris Poll for Grammarly, January 2022

Let's imagine adding another layer of difficulty to the situation.

Another language, a culture different from our own, training, and a resume that isn't completely compatible with the context we find ourselves working in.

That has been, and still is, our experience.

Like many Italians who live and work in the United States, we have had the opportunity to discuss the process of becoming familiar with the American work culture.

We have found ourselves increasingly agreeing on the many **opportunities** and **obstacles** that we have met along the way in our relationships with colleagues, clients, and leaders.

Like a jigsaw puzzle, sometimes we complement each other, sometimes we just don't fit, and sometimes we line up perfectly.

So, we wondered:

How can we build on the experience we have gained to help people planning on working in the States?

And how can we help companies prepare for new arrivals and reduce the adaptation period?

Our Research

We thus decided to analyze the problem from a little closer up and without limiting ourselves to our personal experience.



30 Italian Professionals



Who share a significant amount of work experience in the States, such as having lived and worked there or taking part in or coordinating cross-cultural* projects with US companies.



The study aimed to gather their experiences and understand their difficulties, the strategies implemented to overcome them, and the emotional elements related to cultural integration.

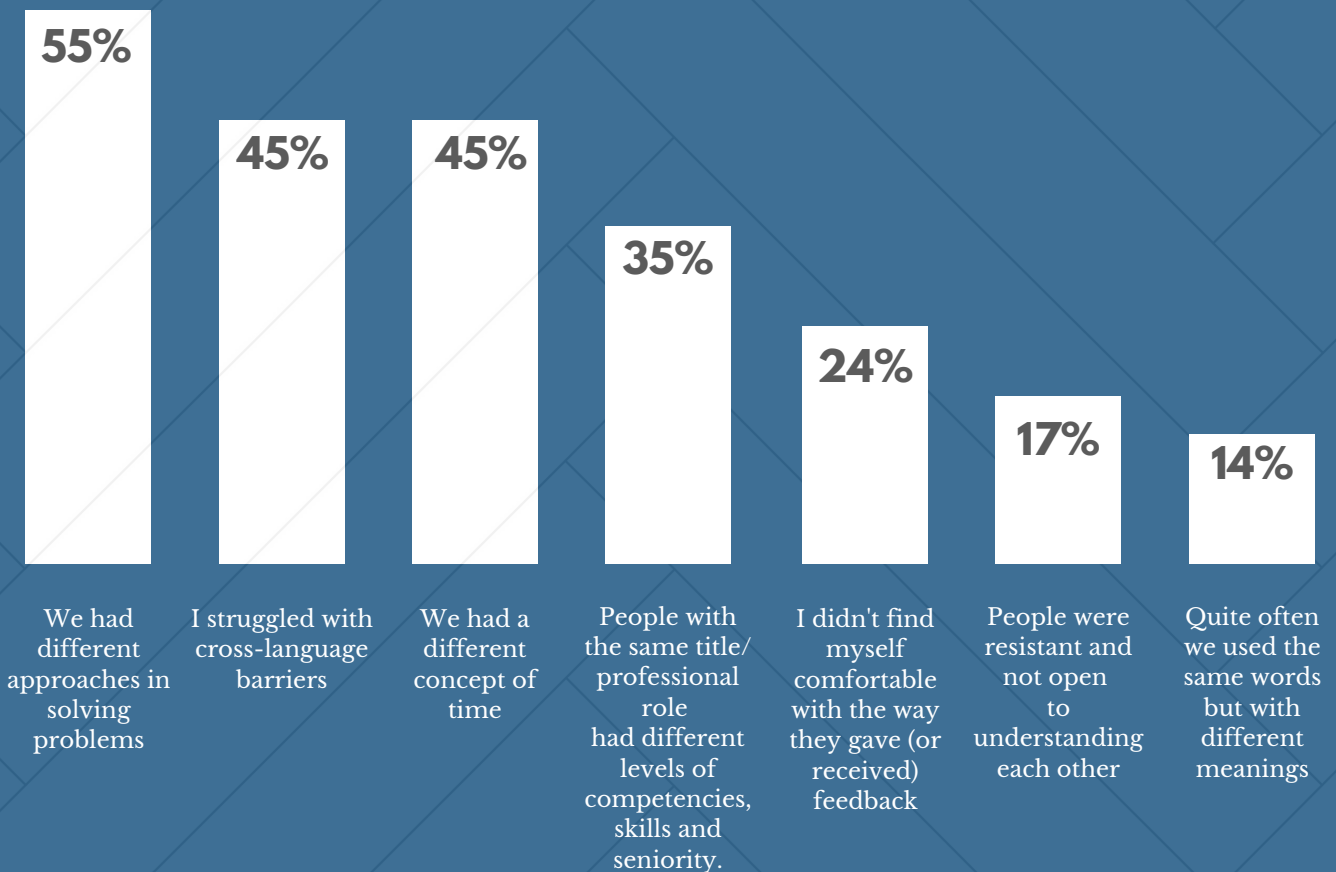
* We use the term "cross-cultural" to identify business contexts where one culture (i.e., the American culture) is often considered "the norm" and all other cultures are compared or contrasted to the dominant culture.

This article summarizes the study's main results with the following aims:

- provide some insights to *Italian professionals* preparing to take on a new opportunity in the States
- give *companies over the pond* some best practices for training and resource development.

Let's start with the challenges.

What are the main difficulties of taking on a new working experience in the US?



Challenge

1

A different approach to problem solving

”

The difference lies in the fact that Americans follow an approach which is a lot faster, more practical and more operational, whereas Italians follow a lot more of an analytical and detailed approach, which requires more time.

“

Americans focus on cost and deadlines, whereas Italians are more oriented towards the final result.

1

A different approach to problem solving

Imagine you were to put on a pair of glasses with blue lenses, and the person you were speaking to wore a pair with yellow lenses. You're both looking at the same object, but you see it differently. In situations like this, the answer is not to assess whether the blue or the yellow lenses are better but rather to be aware that we are using different lenses and consequently adapt the way we communicate.

So, if every problem is a problem of communication, as has been suggested, the solution lies in the way we communicate. And we mustn't forget that communicating also means listening actively and holding off the judgment.

3 actionable tips

- 1 Emphasize the completeness of the message and consider other people's points of view.
- 2 Shift the focus of the conversation from "why" (namely, the reasons why we think our solution to the problem is the most effective) to "how." That is, give the other person the opportunity to understand what is a priority for us and the assumptions we have based our reasoning on.
- 3 Assume a listening attitude and ask the other person questions, perhaps open-ended questions, to thoroughly understand the proposed solution and focus on "how" it arose.

Challenge 2

Cross-language barriers

”

The use of slang has given rise to some embarrassing situations. It takes time to refine the language and learn the different meanings and expressions.

“

"Let's table this" doesn't have anything to do with a table or a chart but is an invitation to come back to the topic later.

”

I've started making a list of words and phrases that I didn't know and spending more time with native speakers.

2

Cross-cultural barriers

The internet is an inexhaustible source of memes about the misunderstanding caused by the incorrect use of some English terms by non-native speakers. After all, even people in intercultural working contexts who have passed language exams with flying colors will, sooner or later, come up against the use of expressions, slang, and acronyms that they don't always understand. Learning these linguistic features is part of integrating into any culture - not just in the US - requires both time and significant commitment.

But that's not all. Integration also encompasses non-negligible emotional aspects.

First of all, is *fear* and *embarrassment* when we cannot understand the language of the person we are talking to and feel lost in translation. Activities like going to the theater to watch a movie in its original language, spending time with locals, and participating in sporting events like American Football can speed up integration. This goes without saying.

It is otherwise helpful to undertake actions to increase our social and cultural vocabulary and facilitate our integration into conversations with colleagues and friends. That's all very well.

Yet, knowing what to do doesn't always translate into doing it precisely because of the emotional aspects that encourage us to stay in our comfort zones.

Discover the power of Vulnerability

- 1 Identify times when you didn't understand and didn't ask for clarifications. What were some of your feelings? Fear of judgment, embarrassment, frustration, pride, etc.
- 2 What would have happened if you had asked the interlocutor to repeat what they've said or explain it using other words?
- 3 You might be surprised that the other person is open and willing to help non-native speakers understand them. They would very likely adapt their language to the person before them for the rest of the conversation. What if you could engage your curiosity and vulnerability in asking the speaker to clarify in the future?

Challenge 3

Time Management

”

I have got used to being punctual. I understand Americans are well-organized, and being on time is part of that organization. For Italians, it's quite the opposite.

“

I arranged to meet two American colleagues in the hotel to drive them to an event in my car. I arrived 10 minutes late and found them calling a taxi at reception.

3

Time Management

Another interesting topic is time in the Italian and American cultures. Italians and Americans often complain about problems in their working relationships arising from managing schedules, agreeing on timelines, or respecting meeting appointments and deadlines.

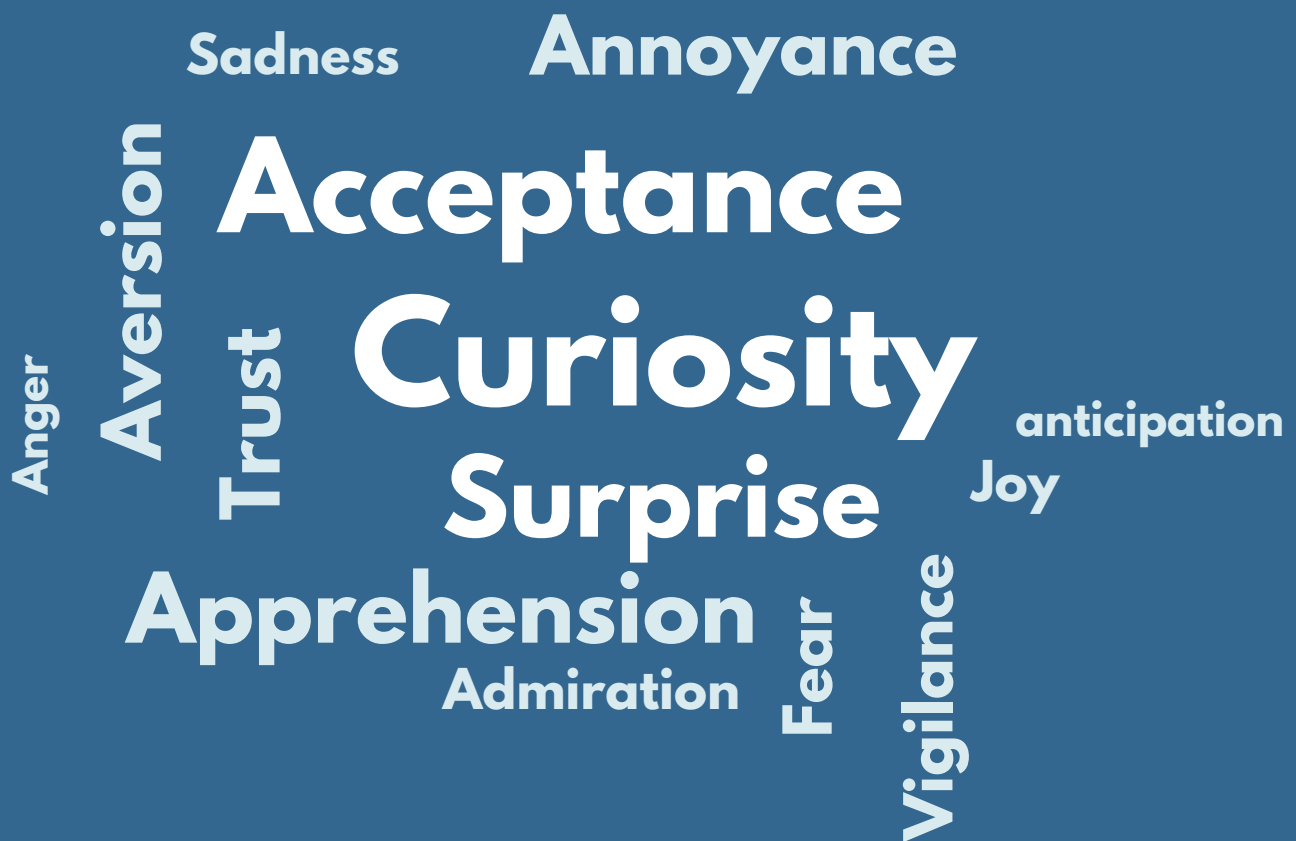
In this case, the risk of falling into clichés is very high, considering that Italians and their American counterparts know the stereotype of lateness as a way of life in Italy.

The majority of interviewees said they had overcome this hurdle by adapting to the American culture, changing their habits to become more punctual, or adjusting their working practices to meet American colleagues' and clients' timelines. How can you meet halfway when people have different concepts of time? Learn to all move at the same pace, adapt shared working methods as much as possible to make teams more efficient, and reduce the stress caused by delays and different timelines. Here are some well-known best practices for people working in complex and intercultural organizational contexts.

3 best practices

- 1 Understand the predominant company culture and, more specifically, the relationship people have with time (check the start and finish time for the working day, breaks, flexibility, etc.)
- 2 Plan meetings a long time in advance, keep them as short as possible, begin with the meeting agenda and goals, and clarify the main activities and timelines agreed.
- 3 Share information as much as possible so that anyone's absence or lateness has as little impact on the group's operation as a whole.

What have been the predominant emotions when faced with difficulty in the integration process?

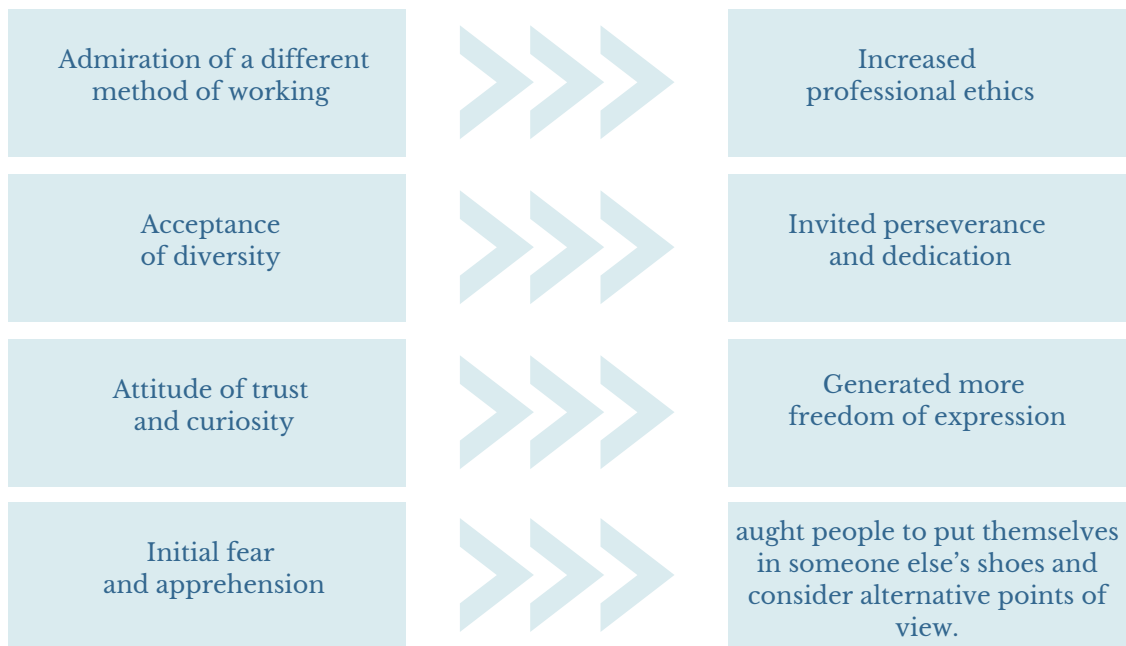


Source: Leading Across Research, March 2022

We asked our interviewees for feedback on their experiences from an emotional point of view. As we have already seen, *acceptance* and *curiosity* mainly stood out, as did *surprise* and *fear*, which are closely linked to experiencing new and unexpected situations.

Can emotions generate positive attitudes?

On the other hand, while analyzing the “lessons learned” from work experiences in the United States, we noticed a correlation with some of the most common emotions:



Generating positive attitudes and behaviors depends on the individuals' emotional intelligence. In other words, their ability to understand and navigate emotions and use them to achieve goals or, more generally, improve wellbeing.

If not addressed correctly, the same kind of emotion, such as the fear of working in a different context, can lead to different types of behavior. Such as a closed attitude and mistrust towards the new context, second thoughts about choices, poor performance, and longer integration times.

What can Italian and US companies do to support culture integration?

After analyzing the main difficulties encountered, their respective solutions, and the dominant emotions, we asked interviewees what they would have liked to do differently in preparation for their new work opportunity.

On a personal level, they stated that they would have benefited from the following:

1

Knowledge of the US professional culture

2

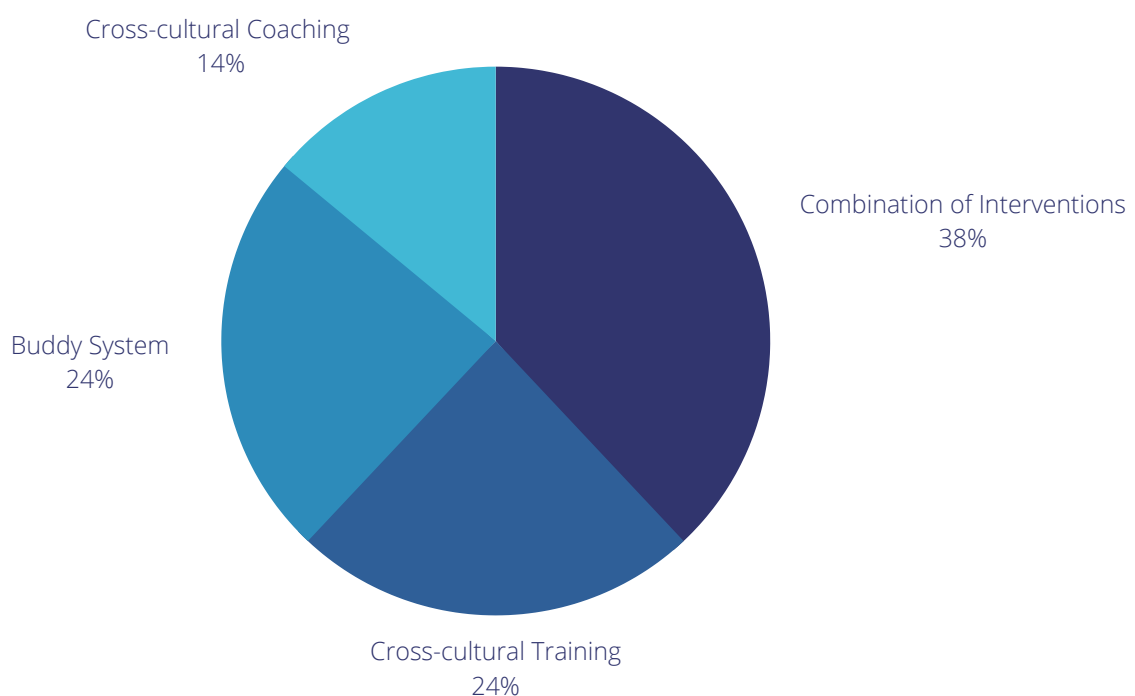
Fluency in English

3

Communication and relationship skills

From an organizational point of view, they pointed out that the following support activities could have encouraged and sped up their integration process:

What kind of support would have been helpful for you?



38% of the interviewees suggested that combining the following interventions would have been the most supportive of the integration:

- **Cross-cultural coaching:** working with a coach to navigate the cultural differences and enhance leadership and communication skills accordingly
- **Cross-cultural training:** participating in workshops about the main cultural differences between American and Italian workplaces and business environments.
- **Buddy system:** partnering with colleagues who have been through the same journey before

Beyond the aggregated data, we noticed that *coaching is a popular choice when combined with either training or the buddy system*. If limited to only one intervention, individuals favored training or buddy support.

In conclusion, organizations that want to develop a diverse and inclusive workplace have the opportunity to leverage the feedback collected and focus on the following areas:

1

Develop training activities on communicational and behavioral differences between the two organizational models

The onboarding process should cover topics such as time management, differences between roles, competencies, seniority levels within organizations, and ways of giving and receiving feedback.

2

Implement an “experience sharing” system

It was easy for some of the Italians we interviewed to find other Italians who had similar experiences and acted as *buddies* during the integration phase. These activities are often not standardized but left to the goodwill and availability of individuals. Nevertheless, it would be advantageous to make them available to everybody as part of the onboarding process by leveraging the company's communication channels (from in-person meetings to intranet and social media).

3

Offer individual and group coaching programs

Cross-cultural business contexts are the perfect ground to train emotional intelligence, develop practical communication skills, and learn to build meaningful relationships based on trust. According to our experience, we believe that problems such as difficulty in reaching an agreement, the need to change our approach to problems, and even the emotional blocks experienced when transitioning to different contexts could stand as the objectives for targeted coaching programs.

Partner With Us



Mariateresa Romeo



Stefania Picheca



We are both passionate about personal and professional growth. Above all, we share the **willingness to help individuals and organizations undertake sustainable changes to improve wellbeing.**

We specialize in **executive coaching, team coaching, leadership development, and interpersonal skills.** We have a similar educational background, but what makes our work unique is the ability to leverage more than twenty years of experience in international and multicultural business contexts.

Leading Across is a recently established project to facilitate the integration between professionals belonging to different cultures. It aims at individuals who want to capitalize on professional experiences in international settings to improve their communication and leadership skills and organizations promoting inclusion, belonging and cultural diversity.

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