Adaptability in life and work

When I first arrived in Belgium to begin my Ph.D. studies, I wasn’t sure how I would survive without my friends and family back in northern India. I had chosen to pursue my doctoral studies at Ghent University because of its unique biological engineering program, but I expected that living in a new country would be challenging. I was right. I had a hard time eating the unfamiliar food (on several occasions I didn’t eat at all) and often struggled to overcome everyday obstacles, such as navigating public transportation and interacting with salespeople.

What I hadn’t realized was how hard it would be on me emotionally. I felt extremely out of place and isolated. I was hesitant to explore anything unfamiliar, nervous that my ignorance of local norms would lead to embarrassment. A few times I reluctantly went dancing with friends, but I stuck to the sidelines because I didn’t know how to salsa, cha-cha, or do any of the other dances everyone else seemed to know. For the most part, I did only what I had to do: I found a place to live and got started on my research project.

I felt discouraged at work, too. I wanted to be productive, but my personal struggles and the typical challenges of starting graduate school got in the way. I now realize that I was trying to rush things, but at the time, my lack of research progress made me feel even more discouraged about my decision to go to grad school abroad. Several times I felt like giving up and flying home.

But slowly, as I became friends with fellow graduate students from around the world, my outlook began to change. I saw how my friends from Italy and Spain threw themselves into the new culture without fear—happy to try new foods, learn about unfamiliar customs, and laugh and be laughed at. As I saw my friends take risks, I decided to take the leap and adopt their mindset. The next time we went dancing, I got out on the floor—even though I knew I would get some of the steps wrong—and I had a great time.

As my newfound confidence grew, I began to push further outside my comfort zone. I initiated conversations with strangers despite my relatively poor grasp of the language and accepted invitations for weekend group trips. I began to appreciate that there can be many “right” ways to think and behave, and that I could feel at home anywhere as long as I allowed myself to become part of the community.

At first, I didn’t think about how this change in perspective might affect my work, but now I realize that many of the qualities I developed to deal with being in an unfamiliar culture—an openness to learning new things, an ability to appreciate and communicate with people from different backgrounds, and a greater comfort with uncertainty and change—have also aided my research career. Over the course of my training, I have followed my intellectual curiosity from environmental engineering to biological engineering to chemistry to applied microbiology to chemical engineering. I think I would have had a hard time successfully crossing these scientific borders if I hadn’t had the experience of adapting to new settings in my personal life.

These qualities have also helped prepare me to take on leadership roles outside the lab, which are personally rewarding and hopefully will strengthen my applications for jobs in the future. Taking on responsibility as the energy and environment chair of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Energy Club, for example, was somewhat intimidating at first, but by looking at it as another challenge to my adaptation skills, I have been able to dive in headfirst.

Even though going abroad for my degree was difficult at first, I’m so glad I did it. Since that time, I have studied in 11 more countries and visited 35 others. Together, these experiences have made me a better person, both personally and professionally, and that is a benefit I never expected when I first set foot in Belgium 12 years ago.

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