

## It's not easy to work in a global world

*Canadian execs need more international experience with emerging markets focus*

Canadian CEOs have significantly less international experience than their counterparts in Australia, according to a new study by Russell Reynolds Associates.

The executive search firm, in conjunction with researchers at the University of Western Ontario's King's University College in London, Ont., interviewed board members at the 100 largest publicly traded companies in both countries. Both Canadian and Australian boards feel strongly about the importance of having a CEO with international experience, found the survey. They see the need for such qualification growing in importance over the next decade.

However, only 37 per cent of large-company CEOs in Canada have international experience, compared to 67 per cent in Australia. The gap is large.

These findings are bad news for Canada — Australia is a key rival in the global market. And with countries such as China, India and Brazil emerging as new economic powers, the ability to work effectively across cultures is becoming more critical than ever.

In the past, Canada has relied on its main trading partner south of the border. The United States provides a very comfortable environment to Canadian executives. However, doing business overseas can be quite challenging.

I gained a better appreciation of this harsh reality through our firm's recent work with a development bank based in Saudi Arabia.

Before this experience, I felt confident in my ability to interact with other cultures — first because of my family history. My dad was born in Algeria, the son of Spanish immigrants. My mom moved to Algeria from Andalusia when she was a teenager. My parents immigrated to France after Algeria obtained its inde-



### ■ GUEST COMMENTARY

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pendence.

Not surprisingly, I developed a keen interest in foreign cultures early on and I travelled extensively around the world. As I started my career, I looked for opportunities to work as an "expat." The first one was here in Canada, where I met my wife. She is from Quebec, a province with a different culture. We moved to northern Europe for a couple of years before returning to Canada. Later, I spent a year in the U.S.

So I felt well-equipped to interact effectively with this bank in Saudi Arabia — I was wrong. Two aspects were particularly challenging to me.

#### **Losing my ability to read a person**

The first hint I would be challenged came during the request for proposal process, which lasted a few months. As time went by, I developed a bad feeling about our chances of success. One day, after a conference call with the selection committee, I decided there was no point in wasting any more resources and energy on this opportunity and I sent an email to the sponsor to withdraw our proposal.

The following morning, there was a fax stating we had won the business. I was shocked. Obviously, I had totally misread the dynamics.

The lesson: Don't blindly follow your in-

stincts — at least, not until you have accumulated enough work experiences to adjust your instincts to the other culture.

#### **Decoding behaviours the wrong way**

As we started working on the first engagement, I had trouble dealing with the sudden changes of pace — most of the time, things moved extremely slowly. Then, without warning, things moved very quickly and we were expected to deliver our work in short order.

I grew frustrated because of the way I decoded the behaviour. I felt it was disrespectful to ignore us for so long, then wake up and demand immediacy.

But the bank was simply operating as usual in Saudi Arabia, where business tends to proceed either at a snail's pace or at light speed — with nothing in between.

Eventually, I got used to this way of doing business. The natural tendency is to interpret the words and actions of others through our standard frames of reference. We need to accumulate different experiences in order to start developing new ways of thinking.

Expatriate opportunities in Western countries or leisure travel don't adequately prepare an executive for the emerging markets. There is no substitute to actually living and working for extended periods of time in non-Western countries.

It is time for large Canadian companies to close the gap highlighted in the Russell Reynolds study. The focus should be on providing senior executives with actual work experience in the emerging markets that are strategically important to each company.

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