



INTERCULTURAL NETWORK FORUM - CONCEPT

DESCRIPTION OF BUSINESS:

Starting in Thames Valley with pilot trial, create an **intercultural networking forum** for local and expatriate company employees and executives, involved in cross-border mobility or alliance integration issues, to meet and exchange ideas with a focus on solving cross-cultural challenges in international trade. The forum should contain a certain **educational aspect** as well as a cross-company international **networking opportunity** at an informal low budget level. The concept is an attempt to deal with the following challenges:

Challenges:

- There are quite a few good intercultural **training providers** who can offer very specific, either country specific or generic corporate training. However, these are normally tailor-made, in-house or company specific. As such they are expensive, so reserved for select high-fliers, and do **not offer the opportunity for the trainees to share ideas** and similar experiences with counterparts in other companies.
- Conversely there is an array of **networking events** and opportunities to meet, such as IoD, IM, associations, clubs, Chamber of Commerce etc.. However these tend to focus on totally different business issues (marketing, recruiting, legal, professional etc.), and as such tend to be attended by locals. Expatriates who are possibly not fluent in the local language may shy away from such networking events. More importantly **there are no networking events that have a focus on intercultural issues**.
- Most intercultural service providers tend to be **training oriented**. Moreover, the training tends to focus on international mobility issues, specifically preparing expatriates for international assignments. Intercultural consultancy is not yet properly understood, and as such there is little that focuses on **cross-border alliance, mergers or joint ventures**, where integration of cultural practices have to happen without necessarily involving large scale expatriation. There is a need for a **wider forum open to intercultural collaboration** issues.
- Because most training is focussed, intensive and company-specific, and being expensive, it tends to be reserved for a **select few** (normally expatriate managers) in larger companies. Many people involved in cross-border alliances, on the other hand, do not necessarily need full-scale training, but would benefit from shorter opportunities that cover basic cross-cultural issues, as well as being able to network with people in similar situations in other companies. There is a need for a **forum open to a wider corporate audience**.
- By the same token **smaller companies often do not have the opportunity** or resources to participate in intercultural events, even though, especially in the Internet age, they may be highly involved in the international arena. There is hence a need for a forum which is not only accessible to a larger multinational company audience, but also which is cost effective and attractive enough to **allow SME personnel and individual entrepreneurs operating internationally to participate, learn and network**.

Solution:

The “**intercultural networking forum**” attempts to address all the above in a cost-effective fashion. It is to be set up as a paid membership, either individually or company-wise for unlimited number of employees, which meets regularly for 2 purposes: a) to allow participants to network, and b) to focus on cross-cultural (human resource) issues of international business. Depending on client feedback it may also be set up as a non-profit organisation with fixed management fees. Remaining monies (after venue hire, catering and management fees) would then be used for some related project, such as promoting ‘globalisation’ positively or researching human integration issues in cross-border mergers and alliances.

Note: It is important to note here that the focus is not on diversity or ethnical issues (within UK companies and society) – which could well form part of different forums in its own right – but on **intercultural issues** as they relate **to international business**. Members could well include, for instance, expatriates from different places and the locals working closely with them, senior managers involved in international marketing or strategy planning, as well locals working in UK offices of overseas companies, hence in regular cross-border interaction and transactions.

FORMAT:

Regular (weekly) ‘meetings’ open to any and all pre-registered ‘members’ (below)

Time:

Probably evenings (after work), though the pilot study may have to experiment different timing options:

Breakfast (before work)

Lunch time

During work time (am or pm)

Evening (after work) - e.g. Tuesdays

Weekend

The events should probably be run on same day of week every week, so that members would have that day fixated and could turn up more or less impromptu.

Place:

- Either member company facilities (larger meeting room) which would allow refreshments
- Or rented premises (e.g. college, university, hotel)

Pattern:

Assuming evening session: 18.00 – 19.00 **Networking**, with refreshments
19.00 – 20.00 **Presentation** or Workshop*, with discussion
20.00 – Continue informal **discussion** & networking

Presentation / Workshop (*):

Each session would have a topical focus, in most cases a presentation, sometimes a workshop. The purpose is both educational as well as to keep the forum focussed with a view of finding ways for constructive problem-solving and to avoid degeneration into pure anecdotal gossip.

Although subject to experimentation in pilot study, one could conceive an event type rotation, such as:

Week 1	Presentation by intercultural service provider (guest)
Week 2	Presentation by forum member (to animate exchange)
Week 3	Workshop by intercultural facilitator
Week 4	Presentation by guest speaker (professor or other expert)

Organiser:

The above, however low key, requires a professional organiser, both from an **event organisation** point of view as well as **arranging the programme** itself. **Transcultural Synergy** will run an initial pilot run in Thames Valley with a view of developing a 'formula' that can be transposed ("franchised") to other locations. Long-term the idea would be to have such forums running in different parts of the country, and possibly beyond. In the early days, especially in the pilot phase, François Knuchel would largely run the workshops and presentations.

Membership:

This needs some experimentation, but basically there would be three types of membership:

Corporate membership:

- o **Company** pays £500 / month – this entitles an unlimited number of employees to attend any session any week. (Annually: £5,000) *
- o **SME** pays £150 / month – this entitles up to 5 employees employees to attend any session any week. (Annually: £1,500) *
- o **Individual** pay £50 / month. An individual would still need to be corporate or in some way associated with business (i.e. no students or other general public). (Annually: £500)

For an individual attending weekly this would represent £12 / week. Individual membership would ideally still be paid by the employing company, but allows smaller companies with very limited number of employees to participate. Note that company membership is still more cost effective even if attendees do not reach ten each week, because it could be different people each time. The view is that the events benefit the company concerned, by allowing any employee to participate in these low key educational experiences at any time.

* Membership is free for any month where the company '**sponsors**' one event in that month. Sponsoring means providing facilities (meeting room, reception, and networking area with refreshments), including arranging refreshments.

Intercultural Service Providers:

Intercultural service providers will be invited to participate. If they **contribute** to a meeting (e.g. run a workshop, do a presentation), then membership for that month is **free**, otherwise the same charges as above. This gives providers an opportunity to network too, i.e. get to know potential clients. Conversely it also exposes corporate members to different local providers.

Admittance:

Admittance to any event is controlled and by **pre-registration**. This is particularly important for security if meetings are held at sponsor company premises. This is also to enable refreshment planning as well to ensure that only members attend. Pre-registration is by email only, directly by registered members.

Membership Acceptance and Administration.

Individuals will only be accepted on advance (monthly) payment. Once a company has registered and paid, their employees can register for membership directly or through the company. If directly the company will need to validate registration before acceptance can be completed. All this will be administered cost effectively over the **internet using e-group technology**. Event programmes and announcements will all be done directly to members by email using the same technology.

E-Groups

In fact admin **communications will all be done electronically directly to members**, as well as to relevant liaison representative of company. Companies will receive data on monthly attendance from their companies. This allows effective communication while allowing cost effective administration. In order to run this efficiently applicants without email will not be accepted in principle.

Coloured name Cards

Open to experimentation, name cards might use colour coding to allow searches and easier networking, such as:

Red	local	Yellow	non-corporate
Green	expatriate	Orange	organiser
Blue	provider	Violet	??

Anticipated Numbers:

Once the idea has caught on and is well understood and appreciated by both the companies, its members, as well as by SMEs and entrepreneurs, it anticipated that a local group might have 10 – 20 corporate members, 20 – 30 SMEs and possibly 30 - 50 individual members. Most members will only attend a limited number of events, but once numbers go beyond a certain number per event (over 100?), then group can be split into smaller regional groups. It is envisioned that eventually the concept spreads organically in this way.

Pilot Study

The initial pilot study would run as outlined above but allow experimentation with different locations, timings and other factors in order to determine the best 'formula'. The initial pilot to be done in Thames Valley (Slough, Reading?) due the proliferation of foreign companies and cross-border alliances. Before that a questionnaire will be circulated to potential members in a number of volunteer companies interested in the scheme, both to make people aware of the forum, as well as to elicit ideal times, days of week, location, topics and other concerns.

ABOUT TRANSCULTURAL SYNERGY:

The globalisation of the economy, with increased cross-border alliances, ventures and global relocations, as well as the advent of e-commerce, has brought about major changes in the field of international customer relations and intercultural diversity management. This has led to an increased appreciation by companies that managing cultural differences properly can be a key factor in getting things done effectively across borders. With increased contact of personnel and customers from diverse cultural backgrounds, there is a growing demand for businesses to understand and manage the diverse values, perceptions, business worldviews and behaviour of corporations, staff, and its customers. Intercultural communication and management is an

interdisciplinary human resources field concerned with facilitating communication, management and effective interaction of personnel and customers across borders.

The same applies when companies invest in premises or facilities in other country locations. Apart from the various financial, legal and logistic considerations, a company should carefully examine the human or cultural compatibility issues involved. This is an area where intercultural management consultants like ***Transcultural Synergy*** can offer invaluable support.

Typically institutions should consider the services of intercultural management specialists when:

- Considering investing in company premises or facilities in other location overseas
- Developing international markets
- Planning a global strategy
- Merging or integrating with other companies across borders
- Developing multi-cultural teams
- Dealing with cross-cultural conflict
- Implementing major Technology / Management Transfer projects
- Managing international customer relation
- Facilitating growth of new technology companies in global arena
- Dealing with international mobility and expatriation issues

THE MARKET:

Market trends:

- Globalisation of economy
- Failing Cross-border mergers and acquisitions
- International Marketing

Potential Market:

- Larger companies operating in the global arena
- SMEs and entrepreneurs in international trade
- Venture capital companies, especially internet (global e-commerce)

Results of Market Research:

Competition:

There are a few cross-cultural providers in the London area, but they either focus on publications (Culture Shock), or Training (Global Excellence, IoR, CIB, LTS or Canning). In a recent research it was found that only 1 company in the whole of Europe offered generic corporate cross-cultural open courses, i.e. courses open to 'corporate public', ITIM in Holland.

All providers questioned said that providing focused courses designed specifically for the company and target culture were far more effective. The Centre for International Briefing in Farnham, Surrey, do offer seminars, but they are residential and are focussed on specific countries or continents, basically intended as preparation for expatriates leaving for specific assignments. The Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce attempted to start a training project during the day, but this failed for logistical reasons.

We have not been able to identify anything like the concept of intercultural networking forum, the concept is new, yet companies have been enquiring about services to that effect pointing to a need. As the concept is new there is no competition, indeed as such intercultural training providers will be asked to participate as this will enrich the concept.

SALES & MARKETING STRATEGY:

Marketing through direct contact with personnel departments of larger companies.

Phase 1: Pilot study

- Selected large companies - explanatory document with questionnaire
 - Formulate first trial format
 - Evaluate and change
- As part of pilot study, might conceive of Alliance Survey (see appendix)

Phase II: Launch – larger companies

- Direct to personnel, ask to pass on to relevant people
- Also attack SMEs through associations
- Marketing document be email (viral marketing)
- Accept applications, confirm with company

Promotional Literature:

INTERCULTURAL NETWORKING FORUM FOR EXECUTIVES

Involved in international business

Benefits for Executives (members)

- Forum for expats to discuss cross-cultural challenges in a focussed way
- Forum for locals to learn and understand expatriate tribulations in a relaxed constructive way
- Exchange of experiences in cross-cultural merger issues
- Paid by company (training), come if you can, just simple email registration
- Opportunity to network with others in other companies.
- Focus on different topic each time
- Can request topic or presenter
- Can raise specific issues to be discussed

Benefits for Companies (& sponsors)

- Exposure to intercultural field at lower cost
- Meaningful event to which executives can simply be sent to
- Allows access for large employee base
- Offers cross-cultural exposure to those not requiring full scale training
- Supplements cross-cultural training
- Offers ideal networking event
- Facilitation of mergers and alliances
- Informal, open to all employees (if registered)
- Focussed networking
- Exposure to local service providers.
- Structured, not anecdotal
- Opportunity to discuss corporate "globalisation"

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