

Argonaut Down Under

It was the “*tyranny of distance*” that first led The International Consultants Centre in Australia to consider the use of Argonaut. We needed to deliver a program in a remote part of the UK, and consulted our UK colleagues at CoghillBeery International. They told us about the online tool, Argonaut that was then newly developed and available, and how they could utilise that to run a program on our behalf.

It quickly became apparent to us in our “lamentably large space” as a poet described Australia, that this was a tool that we could use to neutralise our own tyranny of distance.

But let me tell you who we are and where we operate first. ICC is a company that deals with all aspects of international assignee management, and works in conjunction with Mercer on data and Marsh on health issues. Within the organisation is a team of half a dozen dedicated, experienced and enthusiastic interculturalists split between Sydney and Melbourne. We work with companies sending expatriates offshore and bringing people into Australia, preparing the assignees to be able to operate effectively and confidently in their new environments. The companies are international ones particular in banking, mining, engineering and telecommunications.

Increasingly though we are being challenged to work with much less straightforward issues: people being cross-posted between Indonesia and China, or India and South Africa without ever touching base back in Australia; with management teams within companies who may be scattered throughout Australia and need to understand the complexities of working with their own diverse workforces brought in to work on temporary visas; or those senior managers who are having to negotiate with putative partners in China or India; or again quite junior team members in Australia who are frustrated working in virtual teams with their colleagues in the Philippines, not to mention vice versa.

So our clients can be based in any part of Australia or overseas, particularly in Asia. And our challenge is to deliver a service to them that can help them over the frustrations and hurdles of working with people whose culture they don't understand, to move towards a productive working relationship.

Naturally our preference is to be able to be in front of our clients. It is always easier to establish empathy and delve more deeply into issues when you are face-to-face, but it just isn't always possible. And we find that sending material to people isn't interactive enough to engage their attention.

So one way that we overcome the obstacles is by using Argonaut with telephone coaching.

How does it work? We have, as an example, a client in Adelaide, a smaller regional city, with a business in Saudi Arabia. When they assign an employee

to the Saudi business they send us the assignee details and we make contact, introduce ourselves and Argonaut, send them an access letter and ask them to complete the Argonaut questionnaire for themselves and for their impression of Saudi Arabia. When we are notified by Argonaut of their registration we contact the assignee to set up a time for a telephone coaching session. This might be before they leave Australia, or it might be just after they arrive in Saudi, depending on what is convenient for them. At the specified time the assignee and the ICC coach will both have the results open on line in front of them. The coach will introduce the concepts of culture and its importance in the new working environment. He or she will talk them through the 12 Argonaut dimensions of culture and what they will mean for the participant working in a new culture. Then they will look at the assignee's own cultural map and see where the largest gaps exist, perhaps first between their perception of the new culture and the norms for the culture, and certainly between the assignee's own preferred way of doing things and the norms for Saudi Arabia. The coach will take them through some suggested strategies for bridging those gaps, and the information behind each of those dimensions for Saudi, to help them to understand how and why this culture is so different. The coach may also show the assignee other aspects of Argonaut that they can access, such as the interactive International Negotiator tool. The coach will direct them to the section on Culture Shock and help them to prepare for the challenges of adapting to their new culture.

We encourage the participants to come back to the tool after they have been in the new culture for a couple of months, particularly when they strike situations that they don't quite understand.

For this particular client this is all the company feels is required, and the feedback from the participants has been very positive. The flexibility on timing and ongoing access is an important aspect for them. Other clients may ask us to do further coaching, or to do a follow-up session in 6 months time.

Over the years Argonaut has become an integral part of almost all of our intercultural programs, providing the participants with a framework with which to understand and approach culture, around which we can help broaden understanding, develop appropriate strategies and solve problems. It is a framework that can be used to gain maximum benefit from the contributions of the distinguished subject matter experts that we bring in to our tailored programs, or to understand the different ways that people in virtual teams might have of communicating. It is a practical tool and easy for participants to use, and we find that it delivers just enough knowledge when and where our clients need it.