Diversity and Inclusion Resource Sheet: Expats

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a series of challenges that have added several burdens to our daily lives. What most have found hardest was being away from friends and family, not being able to see them for months. While these are extraordinary conditions, this situation is in fact the reality of many of the 5.81 million expats that make 20.97% of the UK workforce (ONS, 2020). Embodying different nationalities in the team brings numerous benefits. Cultural diversity in the workplace fosters creativity, innovation and drives positive progress (Forbes, 2019). However, expats themselves often face challenges at an individual level that can often be overseen.

During the pandemic, several of these additional burdens that expats face became apparent. These are not exclusive to this unique period. We will be discussing these and suggesting simple behaviours that would allow you to support your expat colleagues and direct reports in bearing this load.

Fear of Being Retrenched in A Foreign Country

The obvious challenge is the fear of being retrenched in a foreign country, the impossibility of returning to the homeland due to lockdown measures, limitations to air traffic and risks of infection from travelling in public transport. Expats were unable to reach loved ones when they were at risk of this serious deadly virus. While the lockdown period has ended at the time of writing, many expats have not yet been able to see their loved ones this year. For instance, those who cannot meet the quarantine period declared when travelling to their home countries and/or returning to the UK as these are in conflict with their work commitments.

Ulysses Syndrome

Another one is the Ulysses syndrome (Achotegui Loizate, 2009). Like Ulysses in Homer's Odyssey many expats left friends, family and home comforts and faced in their journey all sorts of challenges. Ulysses syndrome is a chronic stress suffered by expats in situations of fear, uncertainty and loneliness (Achotegui Loizate, 2009). Over time, this stress triggers a "mourning process". There are seven causes of mourning which have been identified for migrants: language, culture, land, social status, sense of belonging and risks to physical integrity (Achotegui Loizate, 2009). Risk to physical integrity is particularly interesting in the context of the pandemic but should also be taken into account in other situations. It is the migrants' fear of falling sick in a foreign country.

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While these challenges have become particularly apparent with the conditions brought by COVID-19, expats deal with these in their daily lives. For this reason, we have compiled the following table to help you support your expat colleagues and direct reports. It is important to remember that like Ulysses, expats have made enormous sacrifices to live and work abroad and, in many occasions, have done so by choice. Given the many benefits they can bring to the teams and companies they work for, it is both human and advantageous to support them in their journey. Hopefully this table will guide you in doing so and in identifying yourself other positive behaviours that can help your colleagues, everyone is different and needs different things.

Distressing News

The pandemic has affected some countries more than others and at different stages. There was a constant flow of news, some of which were particularly alarming. Following the news also affected expats, inducing stress and fear of issues in their homeland affecting the health or economic prosperity of loved ones.

References

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What	When (example situations)	How can you help?
Fear of being retrenched in a foreign country unable to reach friends and family	• A relative needing care or attention e.g. a health issue. • Urgent issues that need attention in home country that cannot be resolved remotely.	• Make yourself approachable. • Listen to your colleague's or employee's needs. • Respect their privacy, they may not want to disclose this situation to the wider team. • Are there any arrangements possible? E.g. temporary flexi working.
Ulysses syndrome	• Risk to physical integrity. Health issue. • Sense of belonging.	• They may not have an in-country support structure. Are you close? Maybe you can offer to be their emergency contact. • Has your colleague suffered a health mishap by which they temporarily need help to perform daily tasks? While a broken foot or finger may seem unimportant, they may have no one to call. Could you help them with small tasks outside of work? E.g. do they live nearby? Can you help them get some essentials or give them a lift to work or the doctor's? • Foster teamwork through social and sports teamwork activities. • Celebrate the nationality of your colleagues e.g. through a potluck, dinner at a restaurant from their local cuisine, encourage colleagues to share interesting facts from their countries during coffee breaks, be aware or enquire about their national celebrations.
Distressing news from home countries	• Economic crisis. • Terrorist attacks. • Politic turmoil. • Health crisis. • Environmental crisis.	• Ask your colleague how their family and friends are doing, if they are safe. • Ask your colleague if he/she has been affected by the news. Listen and show empathy. • Monitor the situation in the international news. • Show your support.