



MENTOR PROGRAMMES: BRIDGING THE GAP

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MENTOR PROGRAMMES ARE becoming staples of successful onboarding and retention strategies both in Denmark and abroad. Though the benefits and usage of these programmes are still far from being realised. I decided to interview one of the leading experts in Denmark regarding local-expat mentor programmes, Marian van Bakel. Marian is an assistant professor at Syddansk Universitet and consultant for Globally Local here in Denmark, who is leading the way in developing, researching and implementing mentor programmes and the effects of these programmes on the local and expat cohorts. Now to my interview with Marian van Bakel:

Q: HOW DID YOU GET IN THE MENTORING BUSINESS?

It came about through personal experience. I studied abroad both in France and UK and in both places, I participated in a buddy programme. In France I was placed in contact with a French family for nearly a year; whereas in the UK, I participated through Host UK, where I spent a weekend with an English family. It is a great way



getting to meet people from these countries, and I stayed in touch for years after.

Q: HOW DID THE IDEA TO WORK PROFESSIONALLY WITH MENTOR PROGRAMME DEVELOP?

I went back to the Netherlands and started thinking about a PhD, and could see from my experiences abroad that mentor and buddy programmes could be very beneficial for international students, so I decided to examine whether it would work for expats as well. In addition, I was always interested in intercultural communication, as I studied international business communication.

Q: WHAT BENEFITS COULD YOU SEE FROM YOUR RESEARCH IN THE NETHERLANDS?

I could see two major benefits from our mentor programme project. Firstly, there was enhanced cultural learning by being able to ask questions about Dutch culture. Expats could also see exactly how the local Dutch people interacted with each other, and thus created better adjustment strategies. Secondly, coping mechanisms were enhanced. The expats received more social support; which is pivotal living abroad with a diminished network as a starting point.”

Q: HOW DID YOU TAKE YOUR WORK IN THE NETHERLANDS AND TRANSFER IT TO DENMARK?

Two years ago, I received funding to set up a local-host programme at Syddansk Universitet (SDU), which would follow up on the “Get in touch with the Dutch programme” that I had worked on in The Netherlands.

Q: WHAT ADJUSTMENTS HAVE YOU MADE TO THE ORIGINAL PROJECT?

One key adjustment was made. That local host had to be a colleague at the workplace. My PhD research showed that a local host outside of the workplace did not have an effect on job performance and I wanted

to see if this would change if the host would work for the same organisation.

Q: WHAT RESULTS AND INDICATIONS ARE YOU SEEING FROM YOUR NEW PROJECT?

There are work related benefits in terms of creating new networks within the organisation but also information about the workplace; for example, about cultural codes, but also about pay and bonuses in Denmark. In addition, we can see that the benefits of the mentor programme go both ways. The local hosts have developed their language skills and expanded their networks.

Q: WHAT IS YOUR ADVICE TO ORGANISATIONS WEIGHING OVER HAVING A MENTOR PROGRAMME?

A mentor programme can definitely be a nice addition to existing cross cultural training methods. If done within company, it can create networks inter-departmentally and help expats adjust to the culture and work culture.

Q: DOES SETTING UP A MENTOR PROGRAMME REQUIRE LOTS OF TIME AND RESOURCES?

It is relatively easy to setup. I would recommend having one project leader overseeing it. The biggest challenge will be identifying the hosts; and making a decision who to match with whom. The organisation can decide how simple or complex they want to make the programme, for example to what extent they would like to stimulate the contact through organising events.

The most important thing to consider is that expats have a very difficult time connecting with locals in Denmark. Denmark ranked second-to-last in terms of making local friends according to a recently published study*. Having a mentor programme is one way to influence this, as you help expatriates connect with locals. **THE-INTL**
* nordic.businessinsider.com/nordic-countries-are-the-worst-for-finding-friends-according-to-expats-2017-9



THOMAS MULHERN
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
GLOBALLY LOCAL

Thomas is the former International Department Head at Institut Sankt Joseph, where he led the first fully bilingual Danish/English educational program in Denmark. He is himself an expat, married to a Danish repat and father to a Danish/American. Thomas has experienced first-hand the barriers that make integration in Denmark so difficult, but has also learned the tools to breaking down these barriers and what it takes to integrate, and make Denmark a lasting home.

Globally Local uses innovative services to internationalise organisations, and integrate expats and Danish repats.

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