

Living abroad can bring success—if you do it right

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This is Dr. Carmit Tadmor of Tel Aviv University's Recanati School of Business. Credit: American Friends of Tel Aviv University

Dr. Carmit Tadmor of Tel Aviv University says that the benefits of extended international travel depend on having a "bicultural" ability to identify with both home and host cultures.

"Travel broadens the mind" goes the old adage, and potential employers often agree, valuing the open-mindedness and creativity fostered by such worldliness. But according to new Tel Aviv University research, not all international experiences are created equal.

"Although living abroad does help to hone creative abilities, not all individuals who have lived abroad derive an equal benefit from such experiences," explains Dr. Carmit Tadmor of TAU's Recanati School of Business, who conducted the study with Dr. Adam Galinsky of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and Dr. William Maddux of the international graduate business school and research institution INSEAD.

The researchers discovered that the simple act of living abroad was not enough to bolster creative and professional success. The potential benefits of extended international travel depend on the ability to simultaneously identify with both home and host cultures, which the researchers call "biculturalism." Identifying with two cultures simultaneously fosters a more complex thinking style that views things from multiple perspectives and forges conceptual links among them.

"Unlike patterns of cultural identification in which individuals endorse only one of the two cultures, bicultural identification requires individuals to take into account and combine the perspectives of both old and new cultures," explains Dr. Tadmor. "Over time, this information processing capability, or 'integrative complexity,' becomes a tool for making sense of the world and will help individuals perform better in both creative and professional domains."

This study was recently published in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

Measuring creative and professional success

The researchers conducted three experiments to determine the impact of biculturalism when living abroad. In the first, 78 MBA students comprising 26 different nationalities at a European business school were asked to complete a series of tasks, including a standard creativity task

that asked for as many uses for a brick as possible within a two-minute time limit. In the second experiment, a group of 54 MBA students comprising 18 nationalities at an American [business school](#) were asked to describe the new businesses, products, and processes they had invented during their careers. All of the study participants had lived abroad for a period of time.

The studies found that those who identified with both their host culture and their home culture consistently demonstrated more fluency, flexibility, novelty and innovation.

Finally, the third experiment extended the idea, exploring whether the biculturals' advantages also gave them an advantage in the workplace. In this study, 100 Israelis living and working mainly in California's Silicon Valley were interviewed. The researchers found that Israelis who identified with both their home and host cultures enjoyed higher promotion rates and more positive reputations among their colleagues. Across all three studies, the researchers found that bicultural individuals ranked higher on integrative complexity tests than the other participants, and this drove their success.

Taking the hard road to success

The road to biculturalism is fraught with internal conflicts, notes Dr. Tadmor, in which two cultural identities struggle to coexist. It's much easier to surround yourself with your expat community than to straddle two separate worlds. But bypassing the conflicts means giving up the best benefits. Integrative complexity, which is responsible for creative and professional success, evolves through the repetitive resolution of these internal conflicts.

Ultimately, "it is clear that becoming a true bicultural is not easy, but it holds the key to translating foreign experiences abroad into a tangible

toolbox that bolsters one's creative ability and professional skill to the highest level," say the researchers.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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