As the modern workplace becomes more global, companies are putting a bigger emphasis on an employee’s intercultural skills in the office. Now more than ever, companies are no longer just looking for technical skills, they are also putting a greater focus on an employee’s ability to speak another language, demonstrate respect for others, and cope with cultural differences.

Ipsos recently conducted a survey to help better understand how intercultural skills are considered, assessed, and developed in the modern workplace. The biggest challenge they found for employers was being able to find employees with adequate intercultural skills, and most companies do not provide a comprehensive level of training to develop such skills. The research showed that companies need to work together to strengthen the development of intercultural skills in the workplace to meet the growing globalization. Students are encouraged to take Study Abroad programs that will help them develop a deeper understanding of how to learn, communicate, and work with different cultures.

Intercultural skills are important to companies for several reasons. They not only give employees a better understanding of their workplace and co-workers, but they also help them adapt to new work environments and prevent culture shock, while enhancing their cultural awareness, knowledge, and practical skills.

Building a training program based around the enhancement of intercultural skills helps employers in the long run. Most companies are going global, and even if their main workforce is in the United States (or is local), in order to compete with larger companies their workers must have a solid understanding of how to interact with other cultures. Even within the U.S., those living in New York might be used to doing business
differently from those who live in Florida or anywhere in the south. Proper education about specific cultures is important, due to geographical differences wherever you live. There are important social cues that need to be observed and adapted to, depending on where you are. We’ve come up with a few tips to help you get started.

**PERSONAL SPACE IS KEY**

If you’ve ever conducted business with multiple cultures, the first thing you may have noticed is that each culture views personal space differently. Some cultures from the Middle East, for example, feel comfortable with closer physical proximity, while others, like Americans, value personal space and feel uncomfortable if someone gets too close.

**GREETINGS ARE IMPORTANT**

This one is especially relevant. You’ll want to learn the proper way to greet a specific businessperson in his or her respective culture. For instance, in Japan, it’s customary to bow to anyone you do business with, while the Chinese only bow to those they respect. In Latin America, many people kiss both cheeks as part of their greetings in social situations and even business meetings, usually when two women or a man and woman greet each other. Greetings can make or break a business transaction from the start. It’s important when traveling to understand how the culture you are visiting does business.

**LEARN TO RECOGNIZE SOCIAL CUES**

Whether it’s facial expressions, laughter, or an awkward silence, the social cues given off by other cultures are important to recognize and understand. Often when people visit other countries, they get overwhelmed and miss subtle cultural cues. This leads to misinterpretation, which, in the business world, can lead to lost deals, missed opportunities, and overall company failure in the global market.

The best piece of advice for anyone traveling to a foreign country or dealing with intercultural issues is to take a moment and learn about cultural differences. Ask questions. Who knows, it might actually be fun to learn how one culture does business as opposed to another. The workplace is going global and if you aren’t on top of your game in these ways, you might fall behind.

*What are some of the cultural differences you’ve noticed in your own workplace or while traveling abroad? What advice do you have for those who are struggling to cope with these differences?*