Kenya sends a sizeable number of professionals overseas to work as expatriate labour. We call them the “Kenyan diaspora” and the Foreign Affairs ministry estimates they send back home over Sh113bn annually. The Kenyan Task Force on Foreign Labour estimates that the government loses out on Sh3bn in tax revenue every year due to Kenyans living abroad who do not fill their income tax returns back here.

Kenya stands as a net exporter of labour but we host a smaller number of expatriate professionals. Hosting foreign labour helps Kenya to diversify skill sets, extend learning of new skills and technologies, enhance local exposure, and build linkages to those workers’ home countries that then attract donor and investor funds to Kenya. Sensible immigration of skilled foreign workers greatly benefits host countries.

Therefore, many major national firms get nervous about sustainable corporate growth when overly nationalistic governments try to shortsightedly reduce inflows of skilled talent. In
America, the public tussle between the high-tech firms in Silicon Valley fearful of curtailed growth due to more immigration restrictions from President Donald Trump highlights such a struggle. Brexit in the UK, xenophobic attacks in South Africa, and the upcoming French national election all evoke mixed feelings about expatriate labour.

Researchers Nicole Gulleksona and Aidan Dumaisnil examine the role of emotional expression in determining the success of expatriate workers integrating with host country cultures and office environments. Every culture holds what social scientists label emotional display rules.

Some cultures famously avoid outward displays of emotion. Examples include parts of East Asia where emotions often stay closely guarded or, traditionally, Britain and the cultural stiff upper lip. Contrastingly, in America or France, one would immediately see an emotional display reflective of what occupies an individual’s mind.

Globally, agriculturalist-originated cultures show less outward emotion while fishing and pastoralist-originated cultures exude more emotion-based communication. The same paradigm exists here in Kenya with communities showing different degrees of emotional expression based on their ancient economic activity. What emotional display rules endure in our Kenyan culture?

Generally here, emotional remarks centre more on humour and pointing out comical ironies, puns, or situations rather than inner thoughts. So Kenya exists in the middle of the emotional expression continuum.

How do we react in Nairobi if a very expressive Dutch citizen, as an example, voices his or her pleasure or displeasure immediately and concisely at a situation? Since the scenario’s emotional expression exceeds our own Kenyan emotional display rules, our integration with that expatriate would prove less likely.

Jaime Bonache, Hélène Langinier, and Celia Zárraga-Oberty’s 2016 study published in the prestigious Human Resource Management Review found that host country nationals often negatively stereotype foreign workers in their offices. The degree of negative feelings towards the foreigner depends primarily on whether the local individuals accept and include the foreigner into their workplace social circles.

If not, negative stereotypes usually persist towards the expatriate resulting in their lower output and performance.

Additional factors beyond emotional display parity that boost social integration include working towards similar common corporate goals, the social creativity of both parties, training of both host country nationals and expatriates on cross-cultural collaboration, and, oddly, whether both sides share a common enemy in the workplace.

The more you can behave similarly to others’ expectations, the more likely you are to integrate and find fruitful relations with diverse people thus boosting job performance.

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