

# Spotting talent in the 21st century

**As the talent pool widens, companies need to know where they should be fishing. Wendy Wilson, of the UK affiliate of US organisation Families in Global Transition, considers exciting new research that could be of great significance to employers in a globalising world.**

As Mo Farah bowed his head to receive his gold medal at the London 2012 Olympic Games, there were many in Britain who were ready to acknowledge the diverse ethnic mix within Team GB.

According to recently-published research conducted by British Future, Team GB's diversity paid dividends. An analysis of the podium places shows that immigration appears to be a winning factor. More than a third of Britain's London 2012 Olympic medal winners were either born abroad or had a foreign parent or grandparent. Over a third (10 gold, three silver, and 10 bronze) of the 65 medals taken by Team GB were won by athletes whose immediate family came to Britain from overseas.

Team GB is modern Britain. More importantly, team GB is *successful* modern Britain.

Latest figures show that 11 per cent of the UK population were born outside the UK, and 29 per cent have parents or grandparents who were immigrants.

Team GB is our reminder of the irreversible blurring of the traditional concepts of nationality. But beyond nationality lies a more interesting issue. What if the immigration process itself is the key to excellence? What if Mo Farah's unique abilities are actually the result of his exotic back-story? It might just be that the journey itself creates the brilliance.

## The Third Culture Kid profile

The question of cross-cultural heritage has preoccupied US-based not-for-profit organisation Families in Global Transition (FIGT) for a decade. FIGT has been studying a particular demographic often referred to by sociologists as Third Culture Kids (TCKs), or Global Nomads, in order to understand how prolonged cross-cultural immersion, and the necessary adaptation, may impact an individual's psychological and developmental profile.

Founded in the USA by Ruth Van Reken, FIGT has grown into an internationally-recognised think tank for both families transitioning globally and the organisations that support them.

A Third Culture Kid is defined as a person who has spent a significant part of his or her formative developmental years

(between the ages of 11 and 18) living outside their parents' culture(s), usually because of the parents' work. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures that the family has been immersed in, while not having full ownership of any.

## The traditional third-culture model

FIGT has mainly focused its research into the TCK profile across five traditional third-culture expatriate communities (corporate/military/foreign service/NGO and missionary/educators), to identify the specifics of each sector, and to find the commonalities of all those who have lived and

grown up in each of these subgroups.

The research has produced some interesting results, including a comprehensive list of qualities more often than not found in adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs).

Typical TCK characteristics include flexibility, tolerance, and openness to difference. TCKs tend to be excellent at bridging conflict and leading teams, and are natural diplomats. They're great communicators, but also keen observers and problem solvers, as they're able to stand back and approach problems and situations from different perspectives.

They possess a heightened awareness of cultural context, and are highly adaptable. In particular, they're adept at navigating rapid change in complex environments, because they are so open to integrating new experiences.



Fig 1: The Third Culture Model

## Talentspotting

Many of these are skills that set TCKs apart from their domestically-raised peers. They are unique personal characteristics that have been developed as a result of extensive global mobility and cross-cultural immersion. They are also exactly the sort of instinctive skills that are prized by multinational companies looking to staff intercultural assignments.

Often, these 'diamonds in the rough' are overlooked in the hiring process, owing to a lack of understanding of the TCK profile and a failure to appreciate the potential value to an employer of this kind of personal history. It's worth mentioning also that TCKs are not instinctive joiners, and the

path often chosen in adult life is one of the outsider, reluctant to settle within one permanent structure. Recognition and careful management of this are necessary in order to select, nurture and retain this unique 'top talent' potential in a corporate setting.

The pitfalls of choosing the wrong employee for a job are a matter of record. Any HR executive knows that a work narrative for an executive at home can abruptly change if that executive is posted abroad, often with calamitous and costly consequences.

All too often during the selection process, promotion boards examine the past achievements of an employee, rather than the inherent potential. But what works in Southampton may not work in Beijing.

To complicate matters, the traditional demographic of the TCK is now evolving as the global economy grows more complex.

### Cross Cultural Kids: the 'new normal'

Both in modern Britain and beyond, we are now seeing a new 21st-century evolution of the TCK profile into what Ruth Van Reken refers to as Cross Cultural Kids (CCKs). She defines a CCK as "a person who is living in, or meaningfully interacting with, two or more cultural environments for a significant period of time during the developmental years of childhood".

An adult Cross Cultural Kid (ACCK) is one who grew up as a CCK.

As the CCK diagram shows, within the new CCK model TCKs become just one sector of a far wider spectrum. The new model includes other categories of children who grow up cross-culturally for any reason, such as bi-cultural kids, bi-racial kids, children of immigrants, children of refugees, and international adoptees. This looks beyond the TCK experience, which was, in general, related to parents' professions rather than social circumstances.

However, given the extent of research so far, the TCK model is an acceptable reference point from which to study common themes as well as differences in, and among, these other important groups.

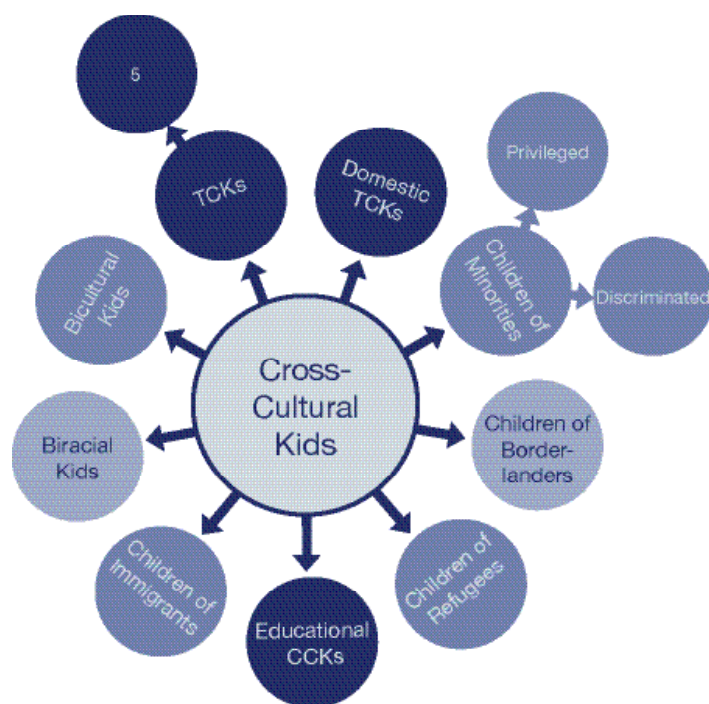
### Broadening the agenda

I agree with Ruth Van Reken that it's time to widen this research agenda. The wealth of all the TCK research to date should now be part of a much larger discussion and research focus that looks at the impact of increased migration and increasingly common cross-cultural lifestyles on people from many different backgrounds.

Looking into the psychological profiles of TCKs, we already know that their cross-cultural lifestyles can lead to complex issues of identity and belonging at different times during their lives, so it's now very important to map this cultural-marginality issue across other CCK groups, to look for similarities and differences.

My own research to date has been on the qualities inherent in global mindset, using a grounded theory methodology to identify the presence, or lack, of that mindset within the coaching profession.

Our newly-launched FIGT UK affiliate in Oxford will enable us to push forward this important research agenda in the UK.



**Fig 2:** *The Case for Research: The CCK Model*  
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FIGT UK's main objective is to build a local UK network across all sectors, to provide a forum of exchange for globally-mobile professionals, families and students, and the organisations that support them. It also aims to empower organisations, individuals and families by sharing research and best practice before, during, and after the international transitions.

Our research agenda at FIGT UK is to link existing data on the TCK profile with researchers and practitioners across different disciplines, to create new research streams relevant to 21st-century global relocation and migration issues.

So far, we know that the study of Third Culture Kids has made it clear that a critical experience of cross-cultural immersion and adaptation in one's formative years can produce talented individuals of extraordinary capabilities in certain fields.

People like Mo Farah fit the new CCK profile exactly, so the study now should be on the likes of Mo Farah and whether or not his affability, his extraordinary aptitude for excellence, and his supreme confidence in his field are not also the result of the challenges of his youth.

If they are, then there are thousands of Mo Farahs out there. Globalisation is breeding a multinational tribe of CCKs. These cross-cultural kids might be children of refugees and immigrants, or they may hail from bi-cultural and bi-racial families, or they may be international adoptees or TCKs.

Their personal journeys will all be very different, but the world of global business, commerce and diplomacy would be advised to take note. As these CCKs enter the workplace, they may well grow into exactly what the 21st century needs to drive a truly multinational world forward.

The talent pool is getting deeper, and the companies of tomorrow need to know where they should be fishing.

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