**POWER SKILLS**

**Keynote Address by Daniel Obst, President and CEO, AFS Intercultural Programs**at the AFS Regional Forum on Global Citizenship Education *Global Citizenship*
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This has been an important forum – and for me the key take away is this: Intercultural understanding, Global competence and global active citizenship are power skills. And we need more people with these skills.

So often these skills have been referred to as ‘soft’ skills. Somehow they are considered less important than the technical skills. This Forum I think demonstrated quite the opposite.

Let me make **THREE KEY POINTS**:

**First**, **Intercultural Understanding is mission-critical for our world.**

**Look at the world’s major challenges**, such as climate change, pandemics, poverty and inequality. Those are global challenges. And they are going to require an understanding of global and local contexts and the ability to communicate effectively. They can only be solved together. And how are we going to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s) if we don’t have more people with an awareness of their role in the word and willingness to take action?

**Look at our neighborhoods and communities and countries.** They are becoming more diverse. So what does that mean for teachers, what does it mean for curricula? How well are we preparing our youth to thrive in a diverse society?

**And look at the political climate in the world today.** As countries turn inward or close borders, as states exit multilateral unions, and as more and more people turn away from the very notion of globalism, we need more people who value diversity and can help us all learn to live together. Exchange students strengthen our communities.

**And of course we need to look at the economy**. In the United States, for example, [one in five jobs are related to international trade](http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/map-day-five-facts-about-us-you-should-know-%E2%80%94-and-one-you-cant-ignore). Globalization has changed the way the world works – and the economy is increasingly interdependent. And this affects not just management consultants, but also mechanics.

Which brings me to my second point: **Global competence is essential to the workplace of the 21st century:**

The [British Council](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/culture-at-work-report-v2.pdf) recently conducted a major survey among nearly 400 employers in 9 countries (including in China, India, Brazil, and many other places).

Their research showed that there is “real business value in employing staff who have the ability to effectively work with individuals and organizations from cultural backgrounds other than their own.” ([Culture at Work, British Council](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/culture-at-work-report-v2.pdf))

**First, International communication is a central function of today’s workplace**. More than 2/3rds of employers in that study report that their employees engage frequently with colleagues, customers or partners, outside of their country.

**Second**, when asked about how important intercultural skills are to their organizations, almost all employers responded that they were very or fairly important. By far **the most highly valued skill (even higher than technical skills) was demonstrating respect for others,** followed by working effectively in diverse teams, being open to new ideas and ways of thinking, collaborative.

And **finally**, more than half of employers surveyed in that study report that they encourage staff to develop intercultural skills. And there are many other studies that confirm similar results.

But there are some real disconnects: A number of [studies](http://content.qs.com/qs/qs-global-employer-survey-2011.pdf) show that when you ask **CEOs,** they all indicate that global skills are required for leadership roles. **Hiring managers**, on the other hand, are mostly focused on filling the technical requirements of the role.

**Therefore I suggest two actions**: We need more advocacy to employers to actively screen for these core intercultural competences and global skills. And we need more badging so that young graduates can demonstrate those skills better when applying for jobs. AFS, for example, recently introduced a [Global Competence Certificate](https://afs.org/archives/certificate/).

More alarmingly, not all young people necessarily think it matters. Recent [study](http://time.com/16103/the-huge-mistake-millennials-are-making-now/) by a business school in the UK looked at **factors that make a job attractive to millennials**. The factor that ranked last: international experience. And the one second to last? Working in a multicultural environment. This was especially true for millennials in the US, UK and France. Millennials in Latin America and Asia tend to have a much higher regard for international experience.

That said, I have hope – because the next generation looks quite different: Generation Z. Various [studies](https://www.inc.com/ryan-jenkins/who-is-generation-z-4-big-ways-they-will-be-different.html) show that Gen Z is much more global in their thinking and interactions, they carry a sense of responsibility, diversity is an expectation. One [study](https://www.wpp.com/wpp/press/2015/may/18/get-to-know-generation-z/) found that 83% say the future is important.

AFS recently conducted a [global survey](https://afs.org/research/) on the attitudes of Gen Z towards international education. Polled more than 5000 teenagers in 30 countries. 66% are motivated by cultural exploration rather than academic reasons. They are seeking out authentic and intercultural experiences. This is encouraging.

**Which brings me to my third and final point**. **We need more active global citizens**, if we want to solve the world’s challenges and if we want to advance as societies.

And that’s why volunteering matters. Volunteerism supports thriving communities and active citizenship and leads to increased social & civic participation, more community cohesion and social inclusion, intergenerational and intercultural integration and ultimately more empowered communities.

And volunteers will be central to helping achieve the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. Volunteers help mobilize communities and constituencies. They help make these daunting goals more relevant to local communities. And, more importantly, volunteers can help change mindsets by raising awareness and inspiring others. If we want to be successful at accomplishing the SDGs, we need to change our attitudes and behaviors and the way we live together.

At AFS, we are built on volunteerism. In the course of WW I and II, AFS volunteers who served as ambulance drivers in the war, evacuated about 500,000 wounded soldiers and civilians. After the end of World War II, these volunteer ambulance drivers pledged to continue the AFS mission of volunteer service—working to promote global peace and understanding through intercultural exchange experiences.

Since then, more than 500,000 young people from around the world have had the opportunities to participate in AFS exchanges that helped transform not only their lives, but also those of millions in their host and home communities around the world. Volunteerism matters.

And we need more active global citizens of all ages who take action in their communities and the world. But this work can’t be done alone. It requires a collective effort and partnerships with governments, NGOs, employers, educators, schools, teachers, volunteers and others.  I would thank all of you here for being part of that effort.