

# Cultural Guide for Swedish Trainees to the U.S.

## Kristen Devendorf

Two real conversations:

Working in a bar in Sweden, someone asked where I was from. I told them California.

“Why would you leave there? California is great!”

“Oh, have you been there?” I asked, wondering where they had been.

“No. But it’s great.”

“You do know it is not like the OC or Beverly Hills 90210, right?”

The boy blushed and said no more.

Upon telling an American friend that I was going on a student exchange to Sweden, a joke was made about eating chocolate in the Alps and buying a clock.

“You are thinking of Switzerland.”

“Oh, what is Swedish then?”

“Well, Volvo, ABBA and IKEA.”

“IKEA? Isn’t that Japanese?”

This is just one case where I knew someone that didn’t know anything about Sweden.

Other times there were assumptions about polar bears and bikini teams. Never having been there myself, I couldn’t really say what it was like.

## Generalizing and Stereotyping

Americans usually generalize and don’t always carry as much meaning in their statements as Swedes. Broad statements and exaggerations are made for emphasis and not fact. That being said, this is not *always* true.

While in the U.S. you may find that these kinds of questions or misconceptions will occur, but there are generally more people that do know about the difference between Sweden and Switzerland. There are many well-traveled people and many that have never left the U.S. in their life. Your experiences will vary depending on your area. Each State has an identity, as does each City. What does it mean to be from Skåne or Småland? What does it mean to be from Umeå or Göteborg? The same goes for where you are in the U.S. So be sure to think about this and be careful when forming your stereotypes or voicing your generalizations. Just as you may think TV shows depict America, be aware that others have their stereotypes and generalize so be open and patient.

## **Directness vs. Politeness**

In writing emails and making telephone calls in Sweden, I have learned to take out a lot of the language I would normally use. American correspondence and telephone calls include more indirect language. An email might begin with a greeting and discuss a general topic before getting to the actual purpose of the email. Not a lot is needed, a sentence or two, but generally it is not good to write an email or start a conversation with a question.

Try:

Hi, Mr. Smith,

How are you today? Thank you for your last email, it was very helpful.

I am sorry to bother you but would you happen to know...?"

The underlined sections are not really necessary to the point of the conversation but are polite. Especially in the beginning of a relationship, it is important to be polite and add small softening phrases. There is a saying "You attract more bees with honey than vinegar." Being polite gets you further than being rude.

Part of this politeness includes dealing with strangers. In stores or eating out, the staff often start with a "Hi, how are you?" This is just a greeting and is most often answered with "Fine" or "Good". If you feel extra friendly you can ask, "How are you?" back.

People will also generally move out of each other's way and take a few extra seconds to hold a door open for someone following in behind them. You don't need to go to extremes but if you see someone coming in behind you, pause a few seconds to hold the door with your hand until they can hold it. It is rude to let a door swing closed if there is someone only a few steps behind you. If someone is in your way, use "Excuse me" to get their notice or say this as you walk past.

## **Personal Space and Intimacy**

Americans are quite easy to get to know on a very superficial basis. You may meet and go out with some Americans and then not hear from them again. You may even exchange emails, or phone numbers. They are generally friendlier and will agree to "Call and have lunch" but are sometimes just being polite. Time will tell if the person calls you and you two meet for lunch. Don't be offended. It is cultural, not a reflection on you. Swedes generally are more difficult to get to know and will not pretend more friendship than there is. It takes longer to get to know a Swede but once a friendship is established,

then the friendship is quite strong. I found it difficult to get to know people and found Swedes to be rude. It just took time to understand the way things worked.

It is generally considered impolite to ask someone's wages or discuss their monetary assets.

A deeper friendship takes a longer amount of time just as with a Swede. I have many American acquaintances but almost no Swedish ones, and only a couple of really good Swedish and American friends.

If someone buys you a drink, a coffee or lunch, this is usual, just offer to get the next one and then pay next time.

## **Punctuality and Work**

Being on time is important in the business world. Being at work 5 minutes early and no more than 5 minutes late is the rule. If going to an important meeting, it is better to be 10 minutes early. For many people, time is money and they do not respond well to someone that wastes their time/money. Flexible hours are beginning to be introduced, but are not common. People are expected to come in on time, perform their hours (8 hours is full-time) and go home. Lunches are shorter and coffee breaks are shorter. Generally a 30-minute fika would not be allowed. This may vary depending on your position, the company, and your managers. Ask if you are unsure.

The work ethic is different than in Sweden. Working extra or above and beyond what others are doing is appreciated and noticed by management. Ambition is a good thing. American working situations are also very hierarchical<sup>[2]</sup>. If you are an intern you are at the bottom. Your bosses and supervisors should be called Mr. and Mrs. not by their first names unless they give their permission. The same goes for clients. Being called Mr. Smith or Mrs. Jones is a show of respect and more professional. Perhaps after establishing a strong business relationship with someone you could try to change to first names. In that case, it is probably best to say: "You can call me..." and see if they follow with giving you their first names. If dealing with Swedish-Americans then they might be more receptive to first names. If unsure, ask your supervisor.

If you experience any problems or feel something is not right, you should always go to your immediate boss or supervisor. If your problem is with your boss or supervisor you should ask someone in your human resources department (HR) about what to do. You can also contact your visa sponsor (SACC-USA).

Business and work dress is generally more conservative than in Sweden. Jeans, shorts, short skirts, T-shirts, low-cut tops, flip-flops/thongs and sneakers/tennis shoes are generally not okay. Many jobs on the East Coast still require suits, or suit attire for both men and women or at least dress shirts and ties (men). Otherwise for men, dress shirts or polo shirts and slacks or kaki pants with dress shoes. For women knee-length or longer skirt, slacks, and a blouse with nice shoes. Unusual piercing and visible tattoos are not always allowed. You can get a better feel for what is allowed by looking at your co-workers and if you are unsure, ask.

## **Ageism and Sexism**

Youth is part of the hierarchical system. If you are young, your experiences and opinions may not be taken very seriously. If you are middle-aged you are considered worthy of respect (even if you don't agree). Only by proving one's self over time can a young person gain respect.

There is more sexism in the U.S. than Sweden. Glass-ceilings and sex-specific duties still exist in some situations. It is improving but you can expect to see some things that you are not used to in Sweden. If you are ever in a situation where you do not feel comfortable or if you think something said to you is unacceptable, look to a trusted supervisor or contact your visa sponsor (SACC-USA). All forms of sexual harassment are taken **very** seriously and you will likely be introduced to the rules and regulations on Sexual Harassment at your individual work place.

## **Time-off and Holidays**

Since you are an intern/trainee in a training program, not an employee, you are not entitled to vacation time unless agreed upon with the host company. As an intern/trainee generally you will get the same U.S. holidays off as the rest of the company.

Sick days vary so ask your company.

Full-time is 40 hours a week for three consecutive months. Anything over that is over-time. Overtime may be expected, both paid and un-paid. Or you may need to seek approval if you wish to work over-time. Ask your supervisor.

Except for New Years Eve, Americans celebrate their holidays on the day of, not the eve of the day. Christmas is celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> not the 24<sup>th</sup>.

Here are *some* holidays and days of celebration:

- February 14<sup>th</sup>: Valentine's day
- March 17<sup>th</sup>: St. Patrick's day is popular and involves wearing green and drinking green beer (if you are over 21).
- Easter is the same as in Sweden though we celebrate on Sunday. We don't get Good Friday or Easter Monday off of work.
- The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in May is Mother's day
- Third Sunday in June is Father's Day
- July 4<sup>th</sup> is the day of American Independence and is usually celebrated with a BBQ, friends and fireworks.
- October 31<sup>st</sup> is Halloween and people of all ages dress up. Kids trick or treat and adults sometimes have parties. Often, there are haunted houses you can go to.
- The first Tuesday of November is Election Day.
- The last Thursday of November is Thanksgiving. This is also a 4-day weekend for most people and involves family, food and an American Football game.
- December 25<sup>th</sup> is Christmas Day.
- December 31<sup>st</sup> is New Years Eve.

Some holidays are regional like Mardi Gras or Cinco de Mayo. A calendar will show every holiday, including other religious holidays like Muslim and Jewish days of importance. A more complete list can be found

at: [http://www.opm.gov/Operating\\_Status\\_Schedules/fedhol/2010.asp](http://www.opm.gov/Operating_Status_Schedules/fedhol/2010.asp)

## **Crime and Laws**

Though most laws are generally the same in many parts of the world, there are some laws that may take you by surprise. Laws and regulations having to do with drinking are stricter in the U.S. than in Sweden. Whereas it is ok to have an open beer in a car in Sweden so long as the driver is sober, this is not allowed in the U.S. Here are some things that are not allowed:

- Drinking age is 21! No lättöl, and there is no difference in the kinds of alcohol allowed.

- No open alcoholic beverages are allowed in a car at all.
- No drinking in public. (This varies from city to city but is not allowed 99% of the time. The only place that I have ever been where it is ok is Las Vegas.)
- No public drunkenness. If you are too drunk on the streets, the police may take you to jail to sober up.
- Smoking age is 18.
- There are no legal drugs other than alcohol and tobacco. State laws (like California's medical marijuana) are always overruled by federal law, which means it is still illegal in the U.S.
- You are not allowed to cross streets unless it is at an intersection crosswalk. I have actually gotten a ticket for this.

Americans are fond of their lines/queues. Try to find the end. If you cut in front of someone, they may let you know but perhaps not in a very nice way.

Generally, the police in the U.S. are a bit harder than in Sweden. They are there to protect but are always on the look out for people breaking the law. It is best to try and avoid them and keep out of trouble. One thing that is allowed is turning right on a red light in a car. You have to yield to all other traffic and pedestrians but if there is no one coming, you can turn right.

## **Eating Out**

Tipping is expected to be 15%. For really bad service, neglectful service, or worse it is ok to give little to nothing. For just bad service 10% and for really great service 18-20%. In bigger cities (LA/NY), 15-22% may be the standard.

The average time to sit down at a restaurant and eat is 45 minutes in the U.S. The process is quite quick: sit down, order drinks, receive drinks, order food, serve food, server checks back to see if everything is ok, finish eating, maybe dessert, pay check and leave. If you would like to stay a little longer, an hour is acceptable. If you stay 2 hours, tipping a bit extra is appreciated (not required) since the server would usually have been able to serve more customers at your table and made more money. If there is ever a problem, the server should try and fix it. If you didn't like the food, let them know. They may exchange it or offer something else.

Tips are essential to a server's income but, depending on the state, it could mean much more. In some states, servers have their hourly wages decreased on the expectation they will make X\$ in tips per hour. For example, the minimum hourly wage may be \$6 per hour but they may only be paid \$3 in the expectation that they make \$3 an hour in tips. It varies from state to state so ask how it works in your state.

## **Last Note**

You will be an ambassador of Sweden. Remember to be patient, open and curious. Ask questions if you are not sure about something and have a good time. Making friends is easy but it does take time to make close friends and keep them. This does not mean that Americans are shallow or insincere no more than Swedes are rude. It is just different. Good luck.

## **Helpful websites, videos, books and more**

*Websites:*

U.S. Citizenship and Immigrations services website:

<http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>

Document on becoming an American

citizen: <http://www.uscis.gov/files/nativedocuments/M-618.pdf>

This contains helpful hints on:

How housing works, working and interviews, cars and a brief outline of U.S. history and Public Holidays

*Video:*

There are many American TV shows available in Sweden so the following is a video for culture shock:

Videos From Orientation at Columbia University School of Business

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPfb6GijM9Q&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPfb6GijM9Q&feature=player_embedded)

Video explaining Culture Shock and helpful suggestions for serious students (while still being amusing at the same time). There are several parts of this speech, of which, the sound doesn't work properly only during the first segment.

*Book:*

Culture Shock, USA: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette by [Esther Wanning](#)

General guide to Culture shock that might be experienced in the U.S.

*Podcasts:*

### **NPR Shuffle**

Mixed news and stories from National Public Radio (non-commercial). No music. Talk, news, politics, sports and cultural interests. Around 20 minutes long, this is a good introduction to current events.

### **This American Life**

My personal favorite and the #1 downloaded podcast in iTunes. This hour-long show runs once a week and gives a variety of stories (most of them are true) based on this theme. It has become so popular that two years ago they started producing a TV show as well. This is also a public radio show.

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