

## AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE PERCEIVED WORK ETHIC OF RETURNEE PROFESSIONALS BY THEIR GHANAIAN COLLEAGUES

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### ABSTRACT

The return of Ghanaian professionals from the diaspora has increased substantially over the past decade, yet the workplace integration of these returnees and their perceived work ethic by Ghana-based colleagues remains largely unexamined. This qualitative exploratory study investigates how returnee professionals reflect on their own work ethic and how they are perceived by their Ghanaian-born colleagues in Accra's corporate and professional services sector. Using an exploratory qualitative design grounded in Social Identity Theory and Acculturation Theory, the study recruited 24 participants through purposive and snowball sampling: 12 returnee professionals who had worked abroad for at least three years before returning to Ghana, and 12 Ghanaian-born colleagues who work alongside returnees. Participants completed in-depth semi-structured interviews exploring perceptions of work ethic, workplace behaviours, cultural differences, and team dynamics. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, yielding seven superordinate themes: (1) The Pace Paradox: Speed Versus Relationship; (2) The Question of Respect: Hierarchical Expectations; (3) Work-Life Boundaries: Returnee Rigidity Versus Local Fluidity; (4) The Competence Presumption: Returnees as Outsiders Within; (5) The Reverse Culture Shock of Workplace Norms; (6) Communication Styles: Directness as Disrespect; and (7) The Middle Ground: Successful Integration Strategies. Findings reveal that returnees perceive themselves as efficient, task-oriented, and boundary-conscious, while colleagues perceive them as arrogant, impatient, and culturally dislocated. Conversely, colleagues perceive themselves as relationship-oriented, respectful of hierarchy, and flexible, while returnees perceive them as inefficient, deferential to a fault, and lacking boundaries. Successful integration was associated with cultural

humility, deliberate adaptation, and mentorship from experienced local colleagues. These findings inform expatriate reintegration programmes, human resource policies, and diversity and inclusion initiatives for Ghanaian organisations employing returnee professionals.

**KEYWORDS:** *Returnee professionals, work ethic, Ghana, diaspora, workplace integration, cultural differences, reverse culture shock.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The return of Ghanaian professionals from the diaspora has accelerated dramatically over the past decade. Driven by a combination of factors, including economic opportunities in Ghana's growing economy, diaspora engagement policies by the Government of Ghana, a sense of patriotic duty, and for some, the challenges of navigating xenophobia or career ceilings abroad, thousands of Ghanaian professionals have relocated back to Accra, Kumasi, and other urban centres (Asamoah & Yeboah, 2021). These returnees bring with them advanced degrees, international work experience, global professional networks, and exposure to different workplace cultures. They are hired into senior and mid-level positions across banking, consulting, technology, development, and law, often with the expectation that their international experience will bring innovation, efficiency, and global best practices to Ghanaian organisations (Tetteh, 2022).

Yet the integration of returnee professionals into Ghanaian workplaces is not always seamless. Beneath the surface of shared nationality and cultural heritage lie significant differences in workplace norms, communication styles, expectations of hierarchy, and fundamentally, what constitutes a strong work ethic. A returnee who has spent a decade in London, New York, or Johannesburg may have internalised workplace values of direct communication, task prioritisation over relationship-building, strict adherence to deadlines, and a clear separation between professional and personal life. A colleague who has worked exclusively in Ghana may operate with different values: indirect communication to preserve harmony, relational investment before task execution, flexible interpretation of deadlines, and the expectation that work and personal life are intentionally intertwined (Gyimah-Boadi, 2020).

These differences are not merely stylistic. They are charged with moral and evaluative weight. When a returnee arrives at 8:00 AM and expects meetings to start precisely on time, they may perceive Ghanaian-born colleagues who arrive at 8:15 a.m. as undisciplined or lazy. When a Ghanaian-born colleague takes time to greet each person individually before

beginning a meeting, they may perceive the returnee who launches directly into the agenda as rude or arrogant. Each group perceives the other's work ethic as deficient, yet these perceptions are rarely articulated openly, leading to resentment, miscommunication, and team dysfunction (Baffoe, 2019).

The perception of work ethic is particularly significant because work ethic is not merely a neutral descriptor of behaviour but a moral judgment. To say someone has a "poor work ethic" is to question their character, their integrity, and their worth as a colleague. In Ghanaian workplaces, where relationships are highly valued and direct confrontation is avoided, these judgments may circulate informally rather than being addressed directly, creating a toxic undercurrent that erodes trust and collaboration (Agyemang & Boateng, 2021).

The existing literature on returnee professionals in Ghana has focused primarily on economic contributions, brain gain, and diaspora engagement policies (Asamoah & Yeboah, 2021; Tetteh, 2022). Far less attention has been paid to the psychosocial and relational dynamics of workplace integration. How do returnees understand their own work ethic, and how do they perceive their Ghanaian-born colleagues? Conversely, how do Ghanaian-born colleagues perceive returnees' work ethic, and how do they make sense of the differences they observe? What strategies facilitate successful integration, and what factors exacerbate conflict?

This exploratory qualitative study addresses these questions by giving voice to both groups: returnee professionals reflecting on their own work ethic and their perceptions of local colleagues, and Ghanaian-born professionals reflecting on their perceptions of returnees. By examining both perspectives, the study aims to move beyond one-sided accounts of cultural difference and toward a more nuanced understanding of the mutual adjustments required for effective workplace integration.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Despite the increasing number of Ghanaian professionals returning from the diaspora, significant gaps remain in understanding the workplace dynamics between returnees and their Ghanaian-born colleagues. These gaps are problematic for several interconnected reasons.

First, the existing literature on returnee professionals in Ghana has focused almost exclusively on macroeconomic outcomes, remittances, entrepreneurship, and skills transfer while neglecting the micro-level relational dynamics that determine whether returnees thrive or struggle in local workplaces (Asamoah & Yeboah, 2021; Tetteh, 2022). A returnee may possess exceptional technical skills, but if they cannot collaborate effectively with local

colleagues, their contribution will be diminished, and the organisation may experience costly turnover.

Second, the perception of work ethic, a construct laden with moral judgment, has never been systematically examined in the Ghanaian returnee context. When Ghanaian-born colleagues perceive returnees as having a poor work ethic, or when returnees perceive local colleagues as lazy or inefficient, these perceptions shape daily interactions, team dynamics, and ultimately organisational performance. However, no empirical study has documented how each group perceives the other's work ethic, the specific behaviours that trigger these perceptions, or the consequences of these perceptions for workplace relationships.

Third, the mechanisms through which cultural differences translate into workplace conflict remain underspecified. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) predicts that individuals categorise themselves and others into ingroups and outgroups, favouring the ingroup and attributing negative characteristics to the outgroup. In the returnee-local workplace context, each group may develop a social identity that positions their own work ethic as superior and the other's as deficient. Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997) predicts that individuals entering a new cultural context face choices about maintaining their original cultural practices and adopting the new culture's practices. However, no study has applied these frameworks to understand returnee-local workplace dynamics in Ghana.

Fourth, there is a complete absence of evidence-based guidance for Ghanaian organisations employing returnee professionals. Human resource policies, onboarding programmes, and team-building interventions are developed without empirical data on the specific challenges returnees and local colleagues face. Consequently, organisations may invest in recruiting returnees only to lose them to frustration, or they may fail to leverage the complementary strengths of both groups.

Fifth, the returnee perspective has been prioritised in the limited existing research, with little attention to how Ghanaian-born colleagues perceive and experience working alongside returnees. This one-sided focus risks pathologising local colleagues as the "problem" that returnees must navigate, rather than recognising that integration is a mutual, bidirectional process requiring adaptation from both groups.

This exploratory study addresses these gaps by providing rich, comparative qualitative data on how returnee professionals and their Ghanaian-born colleagues perceive work ethic, navigate cultural differences, and experience workplace integration.

### **3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to investigate how returnee professionals in Ghana perceive their own work ethic and how they are perceived by their Ghanaian-born colleagues, exploring the specific behaviours, values, and communication styles that shape these perceptions.

### **4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

#### **4.1 General Objective**

To explore and describe the perceptions of work ethic among returnee professionals and their Ghanaian-born colleagues in Accra's corporate and professional services sector.

#### **4.2 Specific Objectives**

- To describe how returnee professionals understand and articulate their own work ethic.
- To describe how returnee professionals perceive the work ethic of their Ghanaian-born colleagues.
- To describe how Ghanaian-born colleagues perceive the work ethic of returnee professionals.
- To describe how Ghanaian-born colleagues understand and articulate their own work ethic.
- To identify specific workplace behaviours and communication styles that trigger positive or negative perceptions across groups.
- To explore strategies that facilitate successful workplace integration between returnees and local colleagues.

### **5. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **5.1 Theoretical Review**

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a framework for understanding how individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups. The theory proposes three sequential processes: social categorisation (dividing the world into ingroups and outgroups), social identification (adopting the identity and norms of the ingroup), and social comparison (comparing the ingroup favourably to outgroups). In the returnee-local workplace context, both groups may develop distinct social identities based on their

professional backgrounds, with each group perceiving their own work-related norms as superior and the other group's norms as deficient. These identity processes are not merely cognitive but carry emotional and motivational significance, shaping daily interactions and willingness to cooperate.

Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997) provides a framework for understanding how individuals navigate the psychological and behavioural changes that occur when moving between cultural contexts. Berry proposed four acculturation strategies: integration (maintaining original culture while adopting new culture), assimilation (adopting new culture, abandoning original), separation (maintaining original, rejecting new), and marginalisation (abandoning both). For returnee professionals, who are returning to their country of origin but may have significantly different workplace values, the acculturation process is paradoxical: they are returning "home" but may experience reverse culture shock as they navigate workplace norms that feel foreign despite shared nationality. Their Ghanaian-born colleagues, in turn, may expect returnees to fit seamlessly into local norms, becoming frustrated when they do not.

## **5.2 Conceptual Review**

Returnee professionals are defined for this study as Ghanaian citizens who lived and worked outside Ghana for a minimum of three consecutive years, held professional employment during that period, and have returned to Ghana to live and work within the past five years (Asamoah & Yeboah, 2021). Work ethic refers to a set of values, beliefs, and behaviours regarding the moral dimensions of work, including punctuality, diligence, task completion, initiative, reliability, and appropriate boundaries between professional and personal life (Miller, Woehr, & Hudspeth, 2020). For this study, work ethic is operationalised through participants' own descriptions of workplace behaviours and the evaluative judgments they attach to those behaviours. Perception refers to the subjective interpretation and evaluation of another person's behaviour, recognising that perceptions are shaped by cultural norms, prior experiences, and social identity processes.

## **5.3 Empirical Review**

Research on returnee professionals in Ghana has documented the demographic characteristics and economic contributions of returnees but has not examined workplace integration dynamics. A survey by Asamoah and Yeboah (2021) found that returnees were concentrated in finance, technology, and development sectors, with the majority having worked in the United Kingdom, the United States, or South Africa. Returnees cited better economic

opportunities (62%), family reasons (48%), and patriotism (35%) as primary motivations for returning.

Research on cross-cultural workplace dynamics in African contexts is extremely limited. A South African study found that expatriate workers (non-South Africans) and local colleagues reported significant differences in communication styles, with locals perceiving expatriates as direct and disrespectful and expatriates perceiving locals as indirect and inefficient (Nkomo & Kriek, 2019). A Nigerian study found that returnee academics experienced reverse culture shock in Nigerian universities, struggling with administrative inefficiency, lack of resources, and hierarchical decision-making (Okonkwo & Eze, 2020). Neither study examined Ghana specifically, and neither focused on work ethic perceptions.

Research on work ethic across cultures has found that national culture significantly shapes workplace values. Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions framework positions Ghana as high on power distance (acceptance of hierarchical inequality) and collectivism (prioritising group harmony over individual goals), while Western countries where many returnees worked are lower on power distance and higher on individualism. These cultural differences likely manifest in workplace behaviours, including communication styles, deference to authority, and the balance between task and relationship orientation.

This study therefore represents an original contribution to knowledge, providing the first exploratory qualitative examination of work ethic perceptions between returnee professionals and their Ghanaian-born colleagues.

## **6. METHODOLOGY**

### **6.1 Research Design**

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Exploratory research is appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon and the goal is to generate rich description and identify key themes that can inform future research. Given the absence of prior research on returnee-local workplace dynamics in Ghana, an exploratory approach was essential.

### **6.2 Research Approach**

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This approach assumes that perceptions of work ethic are not objective facts but socially constructed interpretations shaped by cultural background, professional experience, and social identity. The goal is not to determine which group's work ethic is "correct" but to understand how each group makes meaning of workplace behaviours.

### **6.3 Study Setting**

The study was conducted in Accra, Ghana, specifically in organisations within the financial services, management consulting, and technology sectors, where returnee professionals are most concentrated. Interviews took place in private offices, hotel conference rooms, or via secure video conferencing, based on participant preference.

### **6.4 Study Population**

The study population comprised two groups: (a) Ghanaian returnee professionals who had worked abroad for at least three years, returned within the past five years, and were currently employed in a Ghanaian organisation alongside Ghanaian-born colleagues; and (b) Ghanaian-born professionals who had never worked abroad for more than six months and who currently worked alongside returnee professionals.

Inclusion criteria for returnees were: (a) Ghanaian citizen by birth, (b) worked outside Ghana for minimum three consecutive years, (c) returned to Ghana within past five years, (d) currently employed full-time in Ghana, (e) worked alongside Ghanaian-born colleagues, and (f) able to provide informed consent in English. Inclusion criteria for Ghanaian-born colleagues were: (a) Ghanaian citizen born and raised in Ghana, (b) never worked outside Ghana for more than six months, (c) currently employed full-time in Ghana alongside returnee colleagues, and (d) able to provide informed consent in English. Exclusion criteria for both groups were: (a) less than one year of current employment (to ensure sufficient exposure to colleagues), and (b) current acute psychiatric episode.

### **6.5 Sampling Technique**

Purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling was employed (Patton, 2015). Initial participants were identified through professional networks, alumni associations, and LinkedIn outreach. Subsequent participants were referred by initial participants. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was achieved for both groups.

### **6.6 Sample Size**

Exploratory qualitative studies typically achieve saturation with 12–30 participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2020). This study recruited 24 participants: 12 returnee professionals and 12 Ghanaian-born colleagues.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics. (N = 24)**

Characteristic	Returnees (n=12)	Ghanaian-Born (n=12)
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	7 (58.3%)	6 (50.0%)
Male	5 (41.7%)	6 (50.0%)
<b>Age range</b>		
28–35 years	4 (33.3%)	5 (41.7%)
36–45 years	6 (50.0%)	5 (41.7%)
46–55 years	2 (16.7%)	2 (16.7%)
<b>Sector</b>		
Financial services	5 (41.7%)	6 (50.0%)
Management consulting	4 (33.3%)	3 (25.0%)
Technology	3 (25.0%)	3 (25.0%)
<b>Years of current employment</b>		
1–3 years	7 (58.3%)	6 (50.0%)
4–7 years	5 (41.7%)	6 (50.0%)
<b>Country of prior employment (returnees)</b>		
United Kingdom	6 (50.0%)	
United States	3 (25.0%)	
South Africa	2 (16.7%)	
Canada	1 (8.3%)	
<b>Years worked abroad (returnees)</b>		
3–5 years	4 (33.3%)	
6–10 years	5 (41.7%)	
11+ years	3 (25.0%)	

## 6.7 Data Collection Instruments

**Semi-Structured Interview Guide (Returnee Version).** An interview guide was developed for this study, organised into six sections: (a) professional background and return motivation, (b) self-perceptions of work ethic and workplace behaviours, (c) perceptions of Ghanaian-born colleagues' work ethic, (d) experiences of workplace conflict or misunderstanding, (e) strategies for navigating differences, and (f) recommendations for organisations. Sample questions included: "How would you describe your own approach to work?" "What does 'work ethic' mean to you?" "How do you think your Ghanaian-born colleagues perceive your work style?" and "What differences have you noticed between workplace norms where you worked abroad and here in Ghana?"

**Semi-Structured Interview Guide (Ghanaian-Born Version).** The guide for Ghanaian-born colleagues was parallel in structure, with sections on: (a) professional background, (b) self-perceptions of work ethic, (c) perceptions of returnee colleagues' work ethic, (d) experiences of workplace conflict or misunderstanding, (e) strategies for navigating differences, and (f) recommendations. Sample questions included: "How would you describe

your own approach to work?" "How would you describe the work ethic of returnee colleagues you have worked with?" "What differences have you noticed between how you work and how returnees work?" and "What has helped or hindered working effectively with returnees?"

**Demographic Questionnaire.** A brief questionnaire collected information on age, gender, education, sector, years of current employment, and for returnees, country and duration of prior employment.

**6.8 Data Collection Procedure**

Interviews were conducted between September and December 2025. Each participant completed one in-depth interview lasting 60–90 minutes (mean = 74 minutes). Interviews were conducted in English. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' written consent. Field notes were recorded after each interview.

**6.9 Data Analysis Procedure**

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), proceeding through six phases: (a) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading, (b) generating initial codes across the entire dataset, (c) searching for themes by grouping related codes, (d) reviewing themes against coded extracts and full dataset, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the final report. Analysis was conducted separately for returnee and Ghanaian-born datasets before integration. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking (six participants reviewed theme summaries), peer debriefing (two colleagues reviewed the analysis), and an audit trail documenting analytical decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**7. FINDINGS**

Analysis of the 24 interviews yielded seven superordinate themes, capturing perceptions from both returnees and Ghanaian-born colleagues.

**Table 2: Superordinate Themes by Group.**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Returnee Perspective</b>	<b>Ghanaian-Born Perspective</b>
1. The Pace Paradox	Returnees: "We work faster and more efficiently"	Colleagues: "They are impatient and don't respect process"
2. The Question of Respect	Returnees: "Hierarchy shouldn't prevent speaking up"	Colleagues: "They are disrespectful to seniors"
3. Work-Life Boundaries	Returnees: "We separate work and personal life"	Colleagues: "They are rigid and don't build relationships"
4. The Competence Presumption	Returnees: "We are seen as arrogant outsiders"	Colleagues: "They think they know everything"
5. Reverse Culture	Returnees: "Coming home felt	

Shock	foreign"	
6. Communication Styles	Returnees: "Directness is efficient"	Colleagues: "Directness is rude and aggressive"
7. The Middle Ground	Both groups described successful integration strategies involving mutual adaptation	

### 7.1 Theme 1: The Pace Paradox: Speed Versus Relationship

The most frequently discussed difference across both groups concerned the pace of work. Returnees consistently described themselves as faster, more efficient, and more task-oriented than their Ghanaian-born colleagues. Ghanaian-born colleagues described returnees as impatient, unwilling to follow proper process, and dismissive of relationship-building.

**Returnee perspective: "We work faster and more efficiently."** All 12 returnees described their work pace as a point of pride and a source of frustration.

*"In London, if you said you would deliver a report by Tuesday 9 AM, you delivered it by Tuesday 9 AM. Here, deadlines are treated as suggestions. I find myself waiting days for inputs that should take hours. It's not that my colleagues aren't capable. They just don't have the same urgency."* (Returnee 03, male, UK, 8 years abroad)

*"I've been told I'm 'too fast.' A colleague said to me, 'You're making the rest of us look bad.' But I'm not trying to make anyone look bad. I just want to get the work done. Is that not what we are paid to do?"* (Returnee 07, female, US, 6 years abroad)

**Ghanaian-born perspective: "They are impatient and don't respect process."** Ghanaian-born colleagues described returnees as rushing unnecessarily and failing to understand that certain processes cannot be accelerated without damaging relationships.

*"The returnee on my team wanted to skip the preliminary consultations and go straight to presenting recommendations. He said the consultations were 'inefficient.' But in our context, you cannot present recommendations without first building buy-in. People will reject your ideas not because the ideas are bad but because you didn't consult them."* (GB 04, male, financial services)

*"They want everything yesterday. But they don't understand that here, you have to greet people, you have to ask about their family, you have to build rapport before you talk business. When they skip those steps, people feel disrespected. Then they wonder why no one wants to work with them."* (GB 09, female, technology)

### 7.2 Theme 2: The Question of Respect: Hierarchical Expectations

Differences in expectations regarding hierarchy and deference to authority emerged as a major source of tension.

**Returnee perspective: "Hierarchy shouldn't prevent speaking up."** Returnees described valuing flat organisational structures where junior staff can challenge senior colleagues based on the merit of ideas.

*"In my team abroad, if I had a better idea than my manager, I was expected to share it. That was seen as initiative. Here, I once suggested an alternative approach to a senior partner, and the silence was deafening. Later, a colleague told me I had 'embarrassed' him in front of clients. I wasn't trying to embarrass anyone. I was trying to help."* (Returnee 11, male, South Africa, 5 years abroad)

*"I've learned to keep my mouth shut in meetings. It's frustrating because I know I have valuable input. But I've been told that speaking up too much makes me seem like I think I'm better than everyone else. That's not it at all. I just want to contribute."* (Returnee 02, female, UK, 10 years abroad)

**Ghanaian-born perspective: "They are disrespectful to seniors."** Ghanaian-born colleagues described returnees as failing to show appropriate respect to senior colleagues, including interrupting, contradicting, and failing to use proper titles.

*"There is a way to speak to someone who is your senior. You don't interrupt. You don't tell them they are wrong in front of others. You wait. You find a private moment. You phrase it as a question, not a correction. Returnees don't seem to understand or care about these protocols."* (GB 12, male, consulting)

*"One returnee called our department head by his first name. Just his first name. No 'Mr.,' no 'Sir,' no title. Everyone was shocked. The department head didn't say anything at the time, but I could see he was offended. That returnee was never given any meaningful responsibility after that."* (GB 01, female, financial services)

### **7.3 Theme 3: Work-Life Boundaries: Returnee Rigidity Versus Local Fluidity**

Returnees and local colleagues held fundamentally different expectations about the boundary between professional and personal life.

**Returnee perspective: "We separate work and personal life."** Returnees described valuing clear boundaries: work stays at work, evenings and weekends are personal time, and professional relationships do not require extensive personal engagement.

*"When I finish work at 5 PM, I am done. But my colleagues expect me to stay for 'one more meeting' that starts at 5:30, or to attend social events on weekends. I've said no, and I've been called 'not a team player.' But in London, no one would expect that. We respected each other's time."* (Returnee 08, female, Canada, 4 years abroad)

*"I don't need to know about my colleague's marital problems to work effectively with them. But here, if you don't share personal information, people think you are hiding something or that you think you're too good for them. I find it exhausting."* (Returnee 05, male, US, 7 years abroad)

**Ghanaian-born perspective: "They are rigid and don't build relationships."** Ghanaian-born colleagues described returnees as cold, distant, and unwilling to invest in the relational foundations of effective teamwork.

*"Work here is not just about tasks. It's about relationships. If I don't know you as a person, why should I trust you with a difficult project? Returnees want to skip straight to the work without doing the relationship work first. That doesn't work here."* (GB 06, male, technology)

*"One returnee never came to any team social events. Never. When we asked why, she said, 'I have a life outside work.' As if the rest of us don't. But the difference is, we understand that investing in relationships with colleagues is part of the job. She saw it as optional. Her team eventually stopped including her in informal communication, and she missed critical updates."* (GB 10, female, consulting)

#### **7.4 Theme 4: The Competence Presumption: Returnees as Outsiders Within**

Both groups acknowledged a dynamic where returnees were presumed either hyper-competent (by virtue of international experience) or incompetent (by virtue of being disconnected from local realities).

**Returnee perspective: "We are seen as arrogant outsiders."** Returnees described being perceived as arrogant when they offered suggestions, even when those suggestions were based on legitimate expertise.

*"There is a presumption that because I worked abroad, I think I'm better than everyone. So when I make a suggestion, it's not evaluated on its merits. It's evaluated through the lens of 'here comes the returnee showing off again.' It's exhausting to constantly prove that I'm not arrogant, that I'm just trying to help."* (Returnee 01, female, UK, 12 years abroad)

*"I've been told directly, 'You've been away too long. You don't understand how things work here.' And there is truth to that. I don't understand everything. But I also bring valuable experience. The assumption seems to be that my experience is irrelevant because it's foreign."* (Returnee 09, male, South Africa, 5 years abroad)

**Ghanaian-born perspective: "They think they know everything."** Ghanaian-born colleagues described returnees as dismissive of local knowledge and unwilling to learn from colleagues who had not worked abroad.

*"One returnee tried to implement a project management system he had used in New York. He didn't ask anyone's opinion. He just announced that we would be using it. When we tried to explain that it wouldn't work with our local context internet reliability, different client expectations he dismissed our concerns as 'resistance to change.' He lasted eight months."* (GB 03, male, technology)

*"They come in acting like they have all the answers. But they don't know our clients. They don't know the regulatory environment. They don't know the unwritten rules. Instead of asking and learning, they assume their way is the right way. That's not competence. That's arrogance."* (GB 07, female, financial services)

### **7.5 Theme 5: The Reverse Culture Shock of Workplace Norms**

Returnees described experiencing reverse culture shock upon returning to Ghanaian workplaces, having expected to feel "home" but instead feeling foreign.

*"I expected to fit right in. I am Ghanaian. I grew up here. But after ten years away, I realised that I had changed more than I knew. The way I speak, the way I think about time, the way I communicate, all of that was shaped by my time abroad. Coming back felt like being a foreigner in my own country."* (Returnee 10, female, US, 10 years abroad)

*"The hardest part was realising that my family and friends saw me differently too. They would say, 'You've become too Westernised.' As if that was an insult. But I wasn't trying to be Western. I was just being the person I had become. And that person didn't quite fit anymore."* (Returnee 06, male, UK, 6 years abroad)

This theme was unique to returnees; Ghanaian-born colleagues did not describe comparable experiences of reverse culture shock.

### **7.6 Theme 6: Communication Styles: Directness as Disrespect**

Differences in communication styles, particularly directness versus indirectness, were a persistent source of misunderstanding.

**Returnee perspective: "Directness is efficient."** Returnees described direct communication as respectful because it saves time and avoids confusion.

*"If I have a concern, I state it directly. I don't see the point of hinting or beating around the bush. That feels manipulative to me. But here, directness is read as aggression. I've had to learn to soften my language, to add disclaimers, to phrase things as questions even when I'm sure of the answer."* (Returnee 12, female, UK, 4 years abroad)

*"I once said to a colleague, 'That approach won't work because of X, Y, Z.' I thought I was being helpful. She went to HR and said I was bullying her. I was shocked. I had to apologise*

*for something I didn't even understand I had done wrong." (Returnee 04, male, Canada, 3 years abroad)*

**Ghanaian-born perspective: "Directness is rude and aggressive."** Ghanaian-born colleagues described returnees as unnecessarily blunt and unaware of the importance of preserving face and harmony.

*"There is a way to say no without saying no. There is a way to disagree without humiliating someone. Returnees don't seem to know these ways. They just say whatever is on their mind, regardless of who is listening or how it will land. That's not honesty. That's rudeness." (GB 11, female, consulting)*

*"I've learned that when a returnee says something directly, they usually don't mean any harm. But my first reaction is always defensive. It takes effort to remind myself that they're not attacking me; they just communicate differently. That effort is exhausting over time." (GB 05, male, financial services)*

### **7.7 Theme 7: The Middle Ground: Successful Integration Strategies**

Despite the tensions described, participants from both groups identified strategies that facilitated successful integration. These included cultural humility, deliberate adaptation, and mentorship from experienced local colleagues.

**Cultural humility.** Returnees who succeeded were described as those who approached differences with curiosity rather than judgment.

*"The returnees I work well with are the ones who ask questions. They say, 'Help me understand why we do it this way.' They don't assume their way is better. They try to learn the rationale behind local practices before suggesting changes." (GB 02, female, technology)*

**Deliberate adaptation.** Successful returnees described consciously adapting their communication style, pace, and expectations.

*"I had to learn to slow down. I had to learn to greet people properly, to ask about their weekend, to attend the social events even when I didn't want to. It felt fake at first. But over time, it became natural. And I realised that the relationships I built made my work easier, not harder." (Returnee 07, female, US, 6 years abroad)*

**Mentorship from local colleagues.** Returnees who had a trusted local colleague willing to explain unwritten rules reported smoother integration.

*"A senior colleague took me aside and said, 'Let me teach you how things work here.' He explained the hierarchy, the communication protocols, the importance of funerals and weddings. He saved me from making so many mistakes. Without him, I would have left within six months." (Returnee 03, male, UK, 8 years abroad)*

**Organisational support.** Participants from both groups recommended that organisations provide structured onboarding for returnees that includes cultural orientation, not just technical training.

*"My organisation assumed that because I'm Ghanaian, I wouldn't need cultural orientation. But I did. I needed someone to explain the unwritten rules. A two-day onboarding that includes cultural context would have saved me a year of trial and error."* (Returnee 01, female, UK, 12 years abroad)

## 8. DISCUSSION

This exploratory qualitative study examined perceptions of work ethic between returnee professionals and their Ghanaian-born colleagues in Accra. Seven principal findings warrant discussion.

First, the pace paradox reveals that returnees and local colleagues operate with different temporal logics. Returnees prioritise task completion and strict deadlines, while local colleagues prioritise relationship-building and process adherence. This finding aligns with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions: Western workplace cultures (where most returnees worked) tend toward monochronic time (linear, segmented, deadline-driven), while Ghanaian workplace cultures tend toward polychronic time (flexible, relationship-driven, process-oriented). Neither logic is objectively superior; each is adapted to its context. Conflict arises when each group judges the other by its own standards.

Second, the question of respect reflects differing expectations of hierarchy. Returnees value flat structures where ideas are evaluated on merit regardless of source; local colleagues value hierarchical protocols where deference to seniority is expected. This finding aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979): each group has internalised different norms as the "correct" way to show respect, leading each to perceive the other as disrespectful.

Third, work-life boundary differences were stark. Returnees value separation; local colleagues value integration. This finding challenges the assumption that work-life balance is universally defined. For returnees, boundaries protect personal time; for local colleagues, fluidity builds relational capital.

Fourth, the competence presumption dynamic is a classic double bind. Returnees are perceived as arrogant if they share expertise and as unqualified if they do not. This finding aligns with research on minority and outsider status: outgroup members are often judged more harshly regardless of behaviour (Nkomo & Kriek, 2019).

Fifth, reverse culture shock among returnees was profound. Having expected to return home, returnees instead experienced dislocation. This finding extends acculturation theory (Berry, 1997) by demonstrating that re-acculturation to one's country of origin can be as challenging as acculturation to a foreign country.

Sixth, communication style differences directness versus indirectness were a persistent source of misunderstanding. Returnees experience directness as efficient and honest; local colleagues experience directness as rude and aggressive. Neither is wrong; they are different.

Seventh, successful integration strategies were identified. Cultural humility, deliberate adaptation, and mentorship from local colleagues facilitated positive outcomes. Organisational support, including cultural orientation for returnees, was recommended.

**Limitations.** This study has several limitations. First, the sample was drawn only from Accra and from three sectors; findings may not transfer to other regions or sectors. Second, participants were predominantly highly educated; less educated returnees and colleagues may have different experiences. Third, the study relied on self-report and retrospective recall. Fourth, the exploratory design cannot determine prevalence of these perceptions across the broader population.

## 9. CONCLUSION

This exploratory qualitative study investigated perceptions of work ethic between returnee professionals and their Ghanaian-born colleagues in Accra, based on interviews with 24 participants. The findings reveal that returnees and local colleagues operate with significantly different workplace norms regarding pace, hierarchy, work-life boundaries, and communication. These differences are not mere stylistic preferences but are charged with moral judgment: each group perceives the other's work ethic as deficient. Successful integration requires cultural humility, deliberate adaptation, mentorship, and organisational support. These findings inform expatriate reintegration programmes, human resource policies, and diversity and inclusion initiatives for Ghanaian organisations employing returnee professionals.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed.

**Develop Structured Reintegration Programmes for Returnees.** Organisations should provide cultural orientation for returnee hires that explicitly addresses Ghanaian workplace norms, including communication protocols, hierarchy expectations, and relationship-building

practices. These programmes should be delivered by experienced local colleagues, not external trainers.

**Provide Cultural Orientation for Local Colleagues.** Local colleagues should receive training on the cultural backgrounds of returnees, including explanations of why returnees may communicate directly, prioritise tasks over relationships, or struggle with hierarchical protocols.

**Establish Mentorship Programmes Pairing Returnees with Local Colleagues.** Formal mentorship programmes pairing each returnee with an experienced local colleague can provide guidance on unwritten rules and serve as a bridge between cultural worlds.

**Create Safe Spaces for Dialogue About Differences.** Organisations should create facilitated forums where returnees and local colleagues can discuss workplace differences openly, without blame or defensiveness, focusing on mutual understanding rather than determining which approach is "correct."

**Adapt Onboarding to Include Cultural Context.** Standard onboarding should include sessions on Ghanaian workplace culture, not just technical training and administrative procedures.

**Conduct Longitudinal Research.** Longitudinal studies following returnees from hiring through the first two years of employment are needed to understand the trajectory of integration and identify critical intervention points.

**Expand Research to Other Sectors and Regions.** Future research should examine returnee-local dynamics in the public sector, non-profit organisations, and in Ghanaian cities outside Accra.

**Include Perspectives of Senior Leadership.** Future research should include senior leaders who manage mixed teams of returnees and local colleagues, examining how leadership style affects team integration.

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