

SPOTLIGHT ON SOUTHERN EUROPE: ITALY - A MULTIFACETED AND UNIQUELY CHALLENGING DESTINATION

Maddalena Michieli; Professional Relo

Italy is renowned for being a 'must-see' country for tourists from around the world. It has earned this reputation for many reasons; it offers a wealth of history, art, nature and fashion to its visitors, not to mention its food and wine. Italy's fame is due also in large part to its welcoming and hospitable population. Visitors flock throughout the year not only to the capital, Rome, but to the many other highlights the country has to offer; the sea in the south, the Dolomites in the north, Tuscany which is located centrally, as well as Venice and many other cities of art that each have a unique heritage. Visitors are global; Americans, Asians, Europeans, Arabs and Africans can be seen in the streets at any time of year.

Yet Italy is more than this, it is the proud holder of many prestigious records, the majority of which are often unknown even to Italians. For example, as far as food is concerned, it has the world's largest number of certified foods, namely no less than 274 PDOs (Protected Designation of Origin) and PGIs (Protected Geographical Indication), which equates to over 20% of European products. As regards wine, in 2016 Italian production reached 50 million hectolitres, thereby continuing its growth trend and surpassing France again. Most importantly, the many PDO (Registered Designation of Origin), DOCG (Registered and Certified Designation of Origin) and IGT (Regional Geographical Indication) wines prove that the focus is increasingly on quality rather than quantity.

Italy also leads the way in technology, pharmacology and automation. It is Europe's second largest exporter of mechanics; in this industry, it ranks third in the world for trade balance, only after Germany and Japan. What is more, Italy is the country with the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites and last but not least, it has the oldest existing university still in operation in the western world, founded in 1088 in Bologna.

According to the list of best citizenships for those travelling or working abroad, recently drawn up by [Nomad Capitalist](#), Italy ranks equal third with Spain, behind Sweden and Belgium.

Italy unfortunately also holds some negative records. It is a major manufacturer of weapons; according to statistics, it is one of the world's top eight exporters, and the number one exporter of so-





called 'light weapons' (handguns and shotguns). Finally, we cannot help but mention the Mafia and its contribution to the economy. According to European statistics institutes and 'Transcrime' (Joint Research Centre on Transnational Crime), criminal and illegal activities account for 1% of the GDP in Italy, compared to 0.9% and 0.7% in Spain and the UK respectively.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Aside from all the data, figures and statistics, when you move to any foreign country, especially if you take your family with you, it is only normal that you have fears and worries. In the case of Italy, these are sometimes exaggerated. Biases and clichés, which often prove ridiculous, unjustified, or at least outdated, as well as poor individual capacity to adapt and interact appropriately in a different social and cultural sphere may dampen enthusiasm about 'Made in Italy' and fuel a 'resistance', which not even VIP relocation packages can overcome!

'Managing Expectations' has become a mantra for all involved with relocation. To DSP operating in Italy this means listening to and understanding clients' expectations in order to translate them into the Italian reality'. Everybody's needs should surface and be taken into the utmost consideration, provided that they are then adjusted to the real situation, to avoid arousing false expectations and generating those 'Dantean circles' that we all have experienced at least once and that are synonymous with a huge amount of stress, frustration and disappointment.

At times, to the assignees, the phrase 'managing expectations' translates into 'This is what I expect from you, and it is part of your job to turn it into a bricks and mortar reality. YOU are the professional and should fill my expectations'. Hence a relocation company is deemed efficient only when it has the powers of a magician, who, instead of producing rabbits out of top hats can deliver huge houses where none exist and residence permits within a couple of days, humble, devoted landlords who would do anything to make their tenants happy and guarantee promptly returned deposits that are untouched despite property damage caused by tenants!

Assignee requests are sometimes so unreasonable that they even prove funny. This was the case, with a customer who asked their DSP to check, before they proposed any house, that the distance to the nearest children's park would not exceed 200 steps, and that this could be covered by always walking on one side of the road, on a pavement with pushchair ramps! (non-existent in most of Italy). Another client wanted the master bedroom to measure exactly 3.58 metres by 4.82, and yet another could not understand why many landlords looked somewhat puzzled or fearful when they learnt that he had 4 dogs! The list of other examples is endless...



EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED!

Relocation assistance is essential in a country such as Italy, where bureaucracy is awkward, weighty and at times even absurd. Nevertheless, the role of the relocation consultant cannot be confined to 'baby-sitting' unreasonable people who are not willing to make any compromise to adjust to their host country, and are not interested in interacting with a new culture; people who do not take advantage of the opportunity to broaden their horizons; people who, after many years in Italy, have not learnt a single word of the language, or persist in giving their overseas mobile numbers as their contact numbers; and above all, people who are intolerant of any obstacles, delays or misunderstandings that may, alas, occur during the relocation process.

ONLY IN ITALIA

This is a country where expatriates need to learn to expect the unexpected. True, it is located geographically within Europe, but many things that occur are hard to relate to the 'European ideal':

Landlords who, at an advanced stage of negotiation, all of a sudden inform you that they have sold their apartment or house so are no longer renting it! Applications for connection to utilities which 'disappear' from suppliers' terminals; or suppliers who, at the crucial point of connection, reject the application because your street number does not exist in their database! Technicians who connect the wrong property to the Internet. Banks that, after the relocation consultant has made all necessary preliminary checks, having given preliminary confirmation, then refuse to open a current account once on site with the customer. Police headquarters which get the validity of Residence Permits wrong (always to the foreigners' detriment of course) but refuse to issue new ones, making the individual concerned go through the all the red tape for renewal long before what should be the expiry date! Public offices who, when asked to issue a certain document, request as a pre-requisite another document which can only be obtained AFTER they issue theirs! The list could go on but we will leave it at this for now...

FLEXIBILITY REQUIRED

It is also to be said that much frustration could be avoided if expats were more willing to listen and adapt their requests to the reality of the destination.

Priorities should be set within what is realistic, yet in many cases 'needs and requirements', which come across more as 'diktats', often remain unchanged despite the destination. If a client has 3-4 children, he will often still want a house or an apartment with (at least) 5 bedrooms and a garage accommodating 2 (big) cars. Likewise, he will still expect immediate internet connection and want to live 5 minutes away from the office, the children's schools, shopping malls for his wife, from woods for his dog AND from the city centre! This might be possible and realistic in his home country but is most certainly not realistic in any Italian city!

FINDING CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

All service providers are aware that certain concepts need to be made known, repeated and stressed 10, 100, 1,000 times, often pushing patience to breaking point. How can this be done clearly and effectively?

Solution A - Clear, concise communication:

It is very productive for DSP managers to hold regular brainstorming sessions with staff and consultants to discuss specific information customers and clients should receive, and how it should be presented; if you write too much, they will not read it; if you write too little you will be certain to leave out exactly what they want to know! If you exaggerate with warnings about the red tape you will scare them, but if you do not thoroughly explain everything that could possibly go wrong, according to Murphy's law, you can be confident that every detail will be sure to go wrong!

It is essential to find the way to convey key concepts simply and concisely:

- Explain the standard procedure of the subject under discussion (e.g. opening a current account)
- Outline the steps required to achieve one's goal, putting them in the correct order
- Provide realistic information on the timeframe
- Check whether procedures and deadlines are in line with the client's/customer's expectations; If they are not explain the local reality once again

Whilst most areas of common local practice are country-specific, in the case of Italy, corporate HR should be made aware that individual cities may present unexpected differences and exceptions.

Solution B - Ascertain as many facts as possible:

Collecting correct and exhaustive information from client companies is another way to try to prevent problems. Sometimes we, as destination service

providers, may seem excessively inquisitive, yet every single question should be aimed at providing a targeted service (e.g. relocation, immigration, settling-in).

Dedicated questionnaires that can be sent to the client company before starting service delivery and insisting on having them compiled is a top priority. Only then can the required support be provided to the incoming employee. Questions should be specific and include aspects such as:

e.g. Rental contracts:

- In whose name should the lease be registered?
- If it is registered in the company's name, what is the maximum available budget, exclusive of service expenses? (These should not be confused with utilities, which vary according to individual consumption).
- Can the employee supplement the rent out of his/her own pocket?
- Does the company wish to implement a standard agreement or specific clauses?
- Who will pay the rent? Who/where will the bank transfers come from?
- In whose name should the estate agency's invoice be registered?

e.g. Assignee data:

- What is the employees' working status? (e.g. relocated from --- / employed in Italy)
- What nationalities are they?
- What is their marital status?
- What nationality are their dependants, if any?
- Do they have any children? If so, how old are they?

e.g. Work contract information:

The Italian bureaucratic system is complex. Take as an example registering with the National Health System: to start with it is essential to know where the employee is formally employed (e.g. relocated employee seconded from the mother-company or foreigner employed as a local hire in Italy). Depending on the answer it can be determined if they are even entitled to register in the system.



Solution C - Aiding a realistic approach:

Thoroughly knowing the critical aspects of the country where you are working and being able to skilfully and civilly manage each client's/customer's expectations is a must; nevertheless, however wonderfully Italy is portrayed as a tourist destination, it is not a magical realm where all dreams come true!

- Relocating employees should first of all be prepared to exchange views with peers, and understand whether and to what extent their requests are realistic and consistent.
- Employers should endeavour not to fuel false expectations, delegating miracles to the destination provider on duty.
- There should be close interaction between HR division and DSP; one being an extension of the other, sharing the values behind our tough and sometimes unrewarding job with a view to heading in the same direction.

CONCLUSION

Clearly teamwork is involved in any relocation; the assignee must be open-minded enough to do their part; the DSP and other global mobility service providers must be sensitively alert to understand the stance of the assignee and guide them through the process, preparing them to be realistic and ready for change, and HR must work in tandem in supporting the assignee and as a partner to service providers.

This applies in any relocation to any destination in the world, yet somehow it seems to apply even more in 'Bella Italia'; a destination that offers so much to those willing to adapt and accept, to adjust and to change. It's a destination where, once the relocation process is over, you can delight in living in the country that is the envy of so many; the must-visit destination with a people full of love, passion and creativity!



Author: Maddalena Michieli; Founder & Managing Director, Professional Relo

Maddalena has been in the relocation industry since 1994 when she founded Professional Relo, headquartered in Milan and covering the entire country. An Italian herself, she has assisted numerous corporate expats confront the realities of living in Italy first-hand.

Professional Relo holds EuRA Global Quality Seal certification.