

# Career shifts – surviving a change in geography:

## From Poland to South Korea

**Szymon Brużewicz**

SciencePro, Seoul, Republic of Korea

### Correspondence to:

Szymon Brużewicz

SciencePro

#1561, 15th fl., D-Cube City Office Building

662, Gyeongin-ro, Guro-gu

08209 Seoul, Republic of Korea

szymon.bruzewicz@sciencepro.co.kr

### Abstract

This article provides an insight from a medical writer who, for family reasons, moved his freelance business from Poland to South Korea. The article discusses cultural differences between South Korea and Western countries and gives practical tips for continuing a medical writing career and building business relationships in a completely different cultural and geographic environment.

Three years ago, in December 2015, I moved from Poland to South Korea. And no, this was not migration for business purposes but 100% for family reasons. Naturally, my freelance business migrated with me to South Korea. From both organisational and legal perspectives, this was a smooth transition, but I must admit this was mostly thanks to my wife, who literally grabbed my hand and walked me through all procedures necessary to register my own business in Korea. Although I still maintain a portfolio of my Polish clients, I obviously also have started positioning myself in the Korean medical writing market. Below, are some my thoughts about this process.

### Korean *savoir vivre* in meeting a new client

Let's begin with a hint of *savoir vivre*. Probably all of you know that in Asian countries you hand out and receive a business card with both hands and with appropriate esteem, so consider this just as a reminder. If the person you are meeting has travelled to Western countries or done business



with people from Europe or the United States, you may shake hands, but I rarely encounter people with such experience. Do not try to establish physical contact, as it may only lead to confusion. In South Korea, a bow is a customary greeting. Depending on the interlocutor's position in a social hierarchy (more about this below), this term may refer to a simple head-nod or to a respectful "belly-button" bow. Thus, not infrequently, the person to whom you offer your hand to shake may not know how to behave. I still sometimes forget this and try to shake hands with my Korean acquaintances. Then, some of them hold my hand till the end of our conversation or shake it every second sentence. Ah, and forget about tapping your Korean client's back, even if you are close with this person!

### The older you are, the more you know

When you meet someone new in Korea, be prepared that one of the first questions he or she will ask is, "How old are you?" (in Korean: *Myeot sarieyo?*). Yes, in Korea age is not a taboo, but an inevitable determinant of your social position. The fact that your Korean interlocutor is older or younger than you will affect the politeness level of your conversation; obviously, this refers primarily to conversations in Korean, but you should also remember about it when you talk in English to a Korean person who is older than you (or is just your prospective client, regardless of age). Koreans' respect for older persons is commendable, especially considering its scarcity in Western communities. However, in Korea, age is also considered a measure of one's experience. This view, however, is not necessarily good from a business perspective. For a Korean customer, the grey hair of a potential service provider means as much (or even more) than a dozen of professional certificates! A young person, although extremely experienced and qualified, may not easily gain trust from a Korean customer simply for being too young.

### Hierarchy above all

Aside from age, professional or scientific titles can help gain trust from potential clients. An owner of a single-person company who proudly lists "CEO" or "President" on a business card will likely not impress anyone in South Korea. However, the situation

changes dramatically if you are a PhD holder or even better, a professor! In South Korea, professors are considered as flawless as the Pope (or even better, considering that approximately half of South Koreans are atheists), and I would not want to be in the shoes of a person who dares to say otherwise.

Let me share an experience from our own working group. A year ago, one local clinical research organisation (CRO) asked my wife and me to edit and submit a manuscript prepared by a group of Korean researchers. The paper was written in amendable English, and we had to rewrite it nearly from scratch. Then we had to wait approximately 3 months for the authors' response and eventually received the same version of the manuscript as before. It turned out that the main author of the paper was a famous Korean professor and no one at the CRO was brave enough to inform him that his writing had been criticised and revised considerably. Instead, after a long debate, they decided to submit the unchanged manuscript to another, less demanding journal.

### Size of company, size of respect

In South Korea, you can exist as a freelancer or one-person company, but this is not as simple and obvious as in some other places, such as the United States. Whether you have "CEO" on your business card or you introduce yourself as a freelancer, before you sign any contract with a Korean client, you should be prepared for a set of

detailed questions. How many employees do you have? What is the organisational structure of your company? How big is your office and where is it located? What was your company's revenue in the recent years? But usually, it is not enough to answer the questions – they will likely ask you for relevant documents and perhaps also request an audit. So, you better think in advance about the way you are going to position yourself in the local market. This trust in large market players seems to be a feature of all companies from East Asia. During one conference, I met a medical writer from the United Kingdom, who for years has maintained his business in China. Among many other interesting things, he told me that a common practice among freelancers working in China is to hire a group of persons to accompany them during business meetings as employees of their 'big' company. After hearing that, I even considered assigning such a role to my father-in-law, a noble Korean gentleman with an extremely serious facial expression ... Just joking, I would never do this to him!

### Communication (not necessarily bidirectional) is a key

When we, Europeans or Americans, think about e-mail correspondence, we usually imagine a series of short, sometimes meaningless, messages:

- "I am sending you the file and will wait for your feedback. Regards!"
- Response (3 to 5 minutes later): "Thank you. I received your document. I will get back to you in x days/months. Best wishes!"
- Response (2 to 3 minutes later): "Thank you for your confirmation. I look forward to hearing from you. Cheers!"

Do not expect such "serial" correspondence when sending an e-mail to your Korean client.

Typically, you send the document to your client and ... nothing happens. Does it mean there has been a problem?

Absolutely not! Unless you received an error message, your e-mail has been properly delivered to the recipients. If you are lucky enough, one of multiple persons carbon copied in the message might be on holiday, so at least you will receive an auto-responder. But aside from this, do not expect any confirmatory or thank you message. The main recipient will get back to you when he or she has something





Typically, you send the document to your client and... nothing happens.

If you are open to new experiences, habits, and culture, immigration to a new country can be a great adventure and a next step to self-fulfilment.

meaningful to write about, for example, 3 months later when the feedback for your work is ready. But be careful! This does not work the opposite way – if your client has a question to you, you should respond immediately. There is a clear-cut line between service providers and service recipients in South Korea and contrary to your expectations, no horizontal partner relationship exists between these two entities.

### Welcome back to school!

From time to time, I deliver lectures for my Korean clients. In Poland, I would prepare 15 PowerPoint slides for a 45-minute lecture, if requested, accompanied by some more detailed training materials as hard copy. Communication during my lectures used to be primarily verbal and based on multiple interactions with the participants. I was even taught not to prepare too many slides overloaded with information and text as it is the best way to torture (or put to sleep) your audience. But things are different in South Korea – everything you talk about during your lecture should be on your slides, and nothing that is on the slides should be left untold. If your client is willing to pay you for a 45-minute lecture, this means that you should deliver the knowledge to your audience in no less than 45 minutes. Forget about using anecdotes to draw the attention of

your listeners, questions to your audience, brainstorming, etc. Welcome back to elementary school (at least the one I remember from my childhood)! I can partially understand this attitude if a lecture is delivered in English; under such circumstances, the audience are more likely to follow the speaker if they can see the whole contents of the presentation on the screen. However, I participated in some lectures delivered by Koreans for Koreans and things looked exactly the same.

### Accepting cultural differences

Reading this text, you may be surprised to hear that I have stayed in South Korea. I must admit that the beginning was sometimes difficult, but now, after 3 years, I have adjusted well to South Korea as a place to work and live. Different, yes, but when we enter a new environment, we should not expect that it will be exactly the same as the previous one, or that we immediately will be recognised as a foreign celebrity and everybody will adjust to our habits and expectations. This sounds quite obvious and logical, doesn't it? But based on the information from various internet forums and social media groups for expatriates working in Korea, I know that still many foreigners who arrive here make such false assumptions. As a result, although they have been

working and living in Korea, not for three but for a dozen of years, they have become increasingly estranged, forming their own national ghettos instead of integrating in the local community. Meanwhile, a key to survive in a new geographic environment is understanding the term *cultural difference*. Unless you do your best to understand and accept cultural differences, you will end like those people mentioned above – frustrated while believing in your own superiority and suffering from lack of acceptance and understanding. However, if you are open to new experiences, habits, and culture, immigration to a new country can be a great adventure and a next step to self-fulfilment.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### Author information

**Szymon Brużewicz, MD, PhD, MBA**, is the founder and owner of SciencePro. He provides medical writing, medical statistics, and translation services for corporate and private clients from Europe and Asia.