

**Name:** Elena, 45 years old

**Home country:** Russia

**Education:** Degree in Librarianship and Information Management from St. Petersburg University of Culture and Arts

**Occupation in home country:** Worked at a Finnish company in St. Petersburg as an administrative assistant and programme coordinator

**Moved to Finland:** Elena moved to Finland 12 years ago

**Languages:** Russian, English, Finnish, learning Spanish

**Intercultural relationship:** Elena's husband is Spanish, they have been together for 15 years



**"MY PATH":** my story before Finland, in Finland, my goals and hopes

Elena moved to Finland 12 years ago together with her 6 years old daughter to live with her husband. She has been living and working in Russia before meeting her spouse at work where he was a consultant giving professional training for employees. After having a long-distance relationship for some time, the couple got married and together decided that Elena and her daughter would move to Finland.

### **INTERCULTURAL FAMILY/COUPLE**

Elena and her husband's different cultural backgrounds are most visible through their communication styles. He tends to speak loudly and uses a lot of gestures, which Elena sometimes perceived as him quarreling at the beginning of their relationship. In contrast, he often thought she was angry at him for no reason seeing her quietness as a sign of resentment. However, for both of them it was a natural behavior that can be explained by cultural and personal differences.

Despite the fact they have different characters, love, trust and support are elements that unite them as a couple. Also, Elena and her husband are keen on watching movies together. She thinks it is good for their relationship that they have a hobby in common, which interests them both and raises topics for discussion. Moreover, the family cooks food from Finland, Russia, and Spain, which is never boring. Besides, they celebrate both Russian and Spanish holidays, as well as Finnish. Their example showcases that it is not necessary to be alike to be together with someone.

*Elena's tip № 1: Think what you and your partner enjoy doing in free time and find a hobby or activity that could unite you as a couple. Be open and experiment!*

### **FINNISH LANGUAGE**

As soon as Elena moved, she started intensively learning Finnish considering it to be her full-time job and dedicating about 7 hours per day to the language. She also enrolled in several Finnish language courses that were running simultaneously, so that sometimes she had 2-3 classes a day. Nevertheless, Elena believes that she was able to master the language only when she started working at a Finnish company. She was surrounded by Finnish speaking colleagues daily and took part in discussions as well as used the language for working purposes.

Elena assumes that the main challenge for foreigners who want to practice Finnish is lack of communication with native speakers. Students in Finnish language courses usually talk to their peers, which prevents them from picking up the right accent and slows down their language integration. That is why she used every possible way to learn Finnish outside of a classroom: asked people in the streets for

directions, communicated with the parents of her daughter's classmates after school, and watched news on the TV.

Elena's husband was very involved in her language learning, as he himself was in her shoes many years ago. He supported her when she had motivational breakdowns, which happened every now and then because her progress was slow at the beginning and she thought her efforts were made in vain. One of his pieces of advice was being patient and persistent in learning Finnish. Eventually, her persistence and regular studies had its effect: now she speaks very good Finnish and feels a part of the Finnish speaking community.

*Elena's tip № 2: Don't wait for a perfect moment or opportunity to come, start learning Finnish today. Use all possible ways of learning, for instance, listening to audiobooks or news, reading books for children and newspapers, watching TV, movies or series with Finnish subtitles.*

## EMPLOYMENT

When Elena moved to Finland, she was full of enthusiasm about finding a job and being employed soon, which sadly did not happen. She was unfortunate to come to Finland in the times of financial crisis when even Finnish people struggled keeping workplaces, not to mention foreigners. Thus, her long employment history mainly included different internships, which unfortunately quite often would not lead to a full-time contract due to the situation. However, she did not despair and put jobless times to good use by learning Finnish or getting additional qualifications and skills. Moreover, during her time as a job seeker Elena received unemployment benefits from the unemployment fund, rather than from the state, allowing her a bit more financial freedom.

Currently, Elena works in Espoo, and it is her second time working for this company. She first started working there in a short-term project in 2012, as one of her colleagues from a previous practical training recommended her to the company that urgently needed an employee. Several years went by after the completion of the project in that company, when they reached out to her wondering if she was interested in working with them again, as a full-time employee. As a feature of the Finnish labor market, Elena names an advantage of having friends or acquaintances who know one as a person and can recommend them to potential employers.

*Elena's tip № 3: If you have a job in Finland, consider becoming a member of työtomyyskassa or a trade union - they can be of great financial support in case you become unemployed.*

## RELATIONSHIPS AND NETWORKS

In the beginning of her stay in Finland, finding friends among people from her own culture and country was beneficial for Elena. She was able to share her concerns with them being sure that she would be understood, as having the same cultural and linguistic background made their communication easier. She made friends among Finnish people mainly at one of her workplaces and through her daughter's classmates.

Elena believes that trust is a cornerstone of establishing relationships with Finnish people, be it colleagues, neighbours or classmates. In the work context, she noticed that since she has proved she was a good employee and fellow worker, her work relationships with colleagues started transforming into a warmer friendship.

*Elena's tip № 4: If you feel lonely not having your networks built in Finland yet, try searching for associations that organize events or meetups in your native language. It is a good chance to meet fellow countrymen, listen to their immigration experiences and share yours.*