

THE CHALLENGE OF MANAGING DIVERSITY

MAKING THE MOST OF MULTICULTURAL EMPLOYEES

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Multicultural employees – those who identify with more than one cultural group – are a very valuable resource for international companies, even though the organizations and the employees themselves might not fully appreciate it. These individuals offer a unique perspective that can make a big difference in the companies they work for.

MULTICULTURALISM • CULTURAL DIVERSITY
• INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS •
INTERCULTURAL SKILLS

When we think of cultural diversity, we usually think of the diversity in our environment. We perhaps have suppliers, customers, partners or competitors from other countries. Maybe our company is a multinational corporation and we work with people from different countries – either on a daily basis face-to-face, or in a virtual team.

Cultural diversity can also exist *within* a person. Multicultural individuals are those who have internalized and identify with more than one culture. The children and sometimes the grandchildren of immigrants frequently internalize and identify with more than one culture. With 244 million international migrants in 2015 alone, according to a UN report, this is a fast-growing demographic and an under-appreciated resource for international organizations.

Multicultural employees can help international organizations operate across borders by connecting people across cultures and using complex thinking skills to solve international dilemmas. Multicultural individuals are members of more than one cultural group, so they keep one foot in each culture. This unique perspective allows them to bring a different set

of skills to their roles as expatriates, members of multicultural or global virtual teams, or global leaders. However, organizations rarely plan to utilize these skills, in part because multicultural employees and their managers often fail to recognize their contributions to the workplace. So, what are the benefits of multicultural employees?

• **Intercultural skills.** One obvious advantage of multiculturals is their language skills, which means they are able to help with translation inside or outside the workplace. In our study, we found that – in a health-care organization – multicultural employees were often asked to translate for patients informally, even though there were professional interpreters on staff.

Multicultural employees may also have better intercultural skills, such as adapting or problem-solving across cultural situations. This happens because people develop a wider range of cultural tools when they have experienced more cultures, meaning they understand values, norms, and appropriate behavior for more than one cultural context. For example, a Chinese-Canadian will be more capable of both communicating directly and speaking in an apparently more roundabout fashion, depending on his or her audience. In addition to developing cultural



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tools, multiculturals also develop complex thinking skills as a result of their experience handling conflicting cultural demands.

Monoculturals, who tend to see the world through a consistent cultural lens, often fail to question this perspective. In contrast, multiculturals commonly apply more than one cultural filter simultaneously, meaning they are more likely to engage in analysis of the issues at a deeper level. They will try to understand where each perspective comes from, the consequences and constraints, and any commonalities. Through the process of differentiating those competing perspectives and drawing links across ideas, individuals develop more complex cognitive structure and become more skillful at developing alternative strategies in intercultural interactions.

- **Social networks.** When individuals belong to multiple cultural groups, they naturally have more diverse social networks. This happens because people tend to see fellow group members favorably, and therefore develop more social ties within their cultural groups than outside them.

For example, a monocultural Chinese individual is likely to view only Chinese as her cultural group, and thus develop close social ties mostly with other Chinese individuals. On the other hand, a Chinese-Canadian-Spanish multicultural is likely to view all three cultures as her own, and therefore make friends with people from all these cultures.

The process of differentiating between fellow cultural group members versus outsiders becomes difficult when individuals have three or more cultures, because the boundaries become blurry. If you have close friends who are Canadians, Spaniards and Chinese, then you are less likely to use a cultural dimension to draw a boundary between your fellow cultural group members and outsiders, and instead use other criteria to build strong social ties,

such as personality, shared interests, profession and so on. You may make friends with a Brazilian because of the shared passion for soccer and surfing, or you may develop a strong bonding with a Ghanaian because both of you are expatriates in Thailand. As a result, your friendships are not restricted to your own cultures, but instead span a wider range of cultures.

Therefore, multicultural individuals have access to larger cultural networks than monoculturals, both within their cultural groups and beyond them.

- **Psychological well-being.** Despite the advantages of being multicultural, there are also challenges. Multicultural employees commonly describe it as a difficult experience, sometimes resulting in lower levels of psychological well-being. It is psychologically difficult to reconcile conflicting demands from multiple cultures, such as conflicting sets of values, norms, assumptions and expected behaviors. For example, my Canadian identity encourages me to be independent and autonomous, and become who I want to be. In contrast, my Chinese identity encourages me to become the person my parents and/or my boss expect me to be. So, when people identify with more than one culture, they are more likely to be torn by conflicting demands from their multiple identities, and feel inconsistent and uncertain about who they are.

- **Implications.** Multicultural employees and their leaders often fail to recognize the unique contributions they can offer to their organizations. Multiculturals sometimes see themselves as holding minority status in the workplace, usually associated with negative outcomes.

With this research, we instead encourage multiculturals and their leaders to recognize multiculturals' valuable access to intercultural skills and abilities. A change in the way multiculturals are seen in the workplace would result in increased



confidence in their potential to make positive contributions to their organizations.

At an organizational level, a different shift should take place: from only considering cultural diversity *between* individuals to also considering it *within* individuals. Managers of multicultural employees should facilitate the transition of this growing demographic from an unrecognized entity to a valued resource.

For example, **Cramton** and **Hinds** (2014) found that multicultural individuals played a pivotal role in the informal process of cultural adaptation that occurred among software development teams whose members were located in the U.S., Germany and India. When delicate communication was necessary between team members from different countries, team members turned first to their multicultural colleagues, who act as informal liaisons. Teammates commonly expect their multicultural team members to act as liaisons because they are more likely to have boundary-crossing social networks and additional language skills.

Although this is a valuable use of multiculturals' skills, we caution organizations to be wary of overuse; when this expectation is added on top of employees' usual work expectations it can cause multicultural individuals to feel overburdened. One of the American participants from the software team study reported that acting as his team's "bridge to

India" consumed 70 percent of his time.

Managers working with multicultural teams should examine the amount of time their multicultural employees spend performing liaison, coordination or translation (cultural or language) activities. They should also consider whether this role is central to their performance in their organizational context, as it would be for international hotel front-desk staff, or peripheral, as for health-care providers who may be spending their time on cultural translation tasks that would be better done by specialists.

If the time is found to be excessive, managers could either find a replacement liaison to take over some of those activities, or reduce multicultural employees' other work expectations, compensating for these important – but often unrecognized – activities.

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MORE INFORMATION:

Fitzsimmons, S. R., Liao, Y., & Thomas, D. C. (2017) "From Crossing Cultures to Straddling Them: An Empirical Examination of Outcomes for Multicultural Employees." *Journal of International Business Studies*, 48, 63-89.

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