

Diversity and culture intelligence: Things you need to know

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The world and the workplaces are becoming more open and diverse therefore individuals need to have skills to understand, respect and work with different people despite their culture, race, language, religious beliefs etc. This will improve interactions within the company and will likely make the company's products and services more inclusive and successful. Cultural intelligence is becoming an increasingly important part of global business, providing a variety of benefits to companies looking to improve it.

Employees with a high level of cultural intelligence play an important role in bridging differences and information gaps in a company: informing their colleagues about different cultures; sharing knowledge among otherwise diverse groups; helping to create interpersonal relations and smooth the interpersonal processes within a multicultural workforce. Thanks to their ability to incorporate diverse talent and help the company make better use of the different viewpoints that a multicultural workforce brings to the workplace, cultural knowledgeable workers often can drive innovation and creativity.

A diverse workforce, whose members have built their cultural intelligence, is a more successful workplace — and according to David Livermore, president of the Cultural Intelligence Centre, a diverse team with high cultural intelligence can outperform homogenous teams. The inclusion of cultural diversity in the workplace is an important first step for companies that want to be competitive internationally. Companies from different sectors, from the [Virgin Group](#) to [Disney](#) and [PricewaterhouseCoopers](#), recognise the value of a diverse workforce.

What is cultural intelligence and why is it important?

Cultural intelligence skills go beyond just being educated, emotionally stable and/or possessing strong general social skills. Livermore, the author of many books on cultural intelligence, including "[Leading with Cultural Intelligence](#)," has been the keynote speaker at the Diversity Dialog of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), "Cultural Intelligence: Why Higher Ed Needs It." He described cultural intelligence as "the ability to communicate and working effectively with people from different cultures." A person with high cultural intelligence is one who "can adapt effectively to various multicultural circumstances," he said.

Cultural intelligence is the capacity of people, organisations, and companies to respond to and function successfully in culturally diverse circumstances. It is a crucial feature for international companies as each country in which they are located needs a particular cultural approach and the ability to get along well with the customers with whom you work. International cooperation has become a significant factor for business success and this cannot happen if companies do not have the cultural intelligence tools, skills, and talents. Cultural intelligence is a network of three integrated components-cultural understanding, cross-cultural skills and metacognition of culture.

Cultural Knowledge

It is made up of content (what) and process (how) awareness in other cultures, such as how and when people communicate conflicts with each other, and how subordinates should be given feedback. Some may wonder if and how you can develop it? You may acquire cultural knowledge through multiple sources, such as newspapers, movies, books, travelling to another country, interacting with people from a different culture or becoming friends with them. This learning experience can be improved if you are mindful of this during the process, for example by carefully recognising what is unique about one community, evaluating why it is unique, and predicting when and how this information might be used in future.

Cross-Cultural Skills

It consists of a broad set of instrumental skills for intercultural effectiveness, in particular:

- Relational skills - Whether you enjoy speaking to people from other cultures and communicate with them.
- Tolerance of uncertainty - Whether you can tolerate uncertainties, ambiguities and unexpected changes in intercultural interaction.
- Adaptability - Whether you can change your behaviour according to cultural demands.
- Empathy - Whether you can put yourself in a culturally different person's shoes and imagine the situation from his or her perspective.
- Perceptual acuity - Whether you understand other people's feelings and subtle meanings during intercultural interactions.

The cross-cultural skills are best developed through experiential learning, e.g. through studying or working in a foreign culture where you can practice these skills through trial-and-error.

Development of these skills is improved by getting the correct cultural awareness established earlier. For instance, if you know that in cultures like Spain meeting someone 10 minutes after your scheduled time is not considered to be late, you'll feel more relaxed when a Spanish colleague doesn't turn up exactly on time for a meeting. Similarly, in a new cultural setting, being adaptive involves knowledge of how to act properly in that culture. Once, this learning experience can be improved if, during intercultural experiences, you are aware and evaluate your behaviour and the responses of your counterpart.

Cultural Metacognition

Cultural Metacognition is sometimes known as Cultural Mindfulness. It is the knowledge of and control over one's thinking and learning activities in the specific domain of cultural experiences and strategies. Being culturally mindful involves being aware of the cultural context, evaluating the social situation critically, and preparing courses of actions for various cultural contexts. To improve cultural metacognition, you need to practice mental exercises where you are observing others' behaviours, analysing the different situations and reflecting on your behaviour.

You can develop and improve your cultural metacognition by doing the following:

- Pay attention to how the other person behaves in a variety of scenarios and responds to you – this serves as the basis for determining whether your conduct has accomplished the desired target. You can then determine what action you want to take next, based on this report.
- Reflect on both positive and negative intercultural experiences, and write down what experience and skills you used during those experiences. Have any hints that you missed or misread? Is there some word or actions that you didn't know how to interpret? In a similar situation, What will you do differently?
- Also, if you already have some cultural understanding and cross-cultural skills, this learning opportunity would be optimised. For example, if you can relate to your counterpart, and you can put yourself in his or her shoes, understanding his or her actions and preparing for your next move would be simpler.

What are the benefits and challenges of cultural diversity in workplaces?

Cultural intelligence offers several benefits which include the following:

- Creation of positive relationships that give importance to the differences between people
- Effective communication within different cultural settings
- Setting up common ground
- Maximize teamwork in communities where people think differently and behave differently
- Differences may be used to strengthen the processes of innovation and to determine intercultural communication
- Providing tools to boost sales efficiency, the output of people and the brand identity
- Maximizing production by the corporate mark
- Diverse teams are more productive and perform better
- Encouraging people to be the best they can be
- Providing perspectives to help foreign colleagues and customers understand better
- Diverse cultural perspectives can inspire creativity and drive innovation
- Local market knowledge and insight make a business more competitive and profitable
- Cultural sensitivity, insight, and local knowledge means higher quality, targeted marketing
- Drawing from a culturally diverse talent pool allows a company to attract and retain the best talent
- A diverse skills base allows a company to offer a broader and more adaptable range of products and services
- Greater opportunity for personal and professional growth

But with benefits necessarily come challenges of working across borders, cultures, and languages. The following are some of the challenges that include:

- Colleagues from some cultures may be less likely to let their voices be heard
- Integration across multicultural teams can be difficult in the face of prejudice or negative cultural stereotypes

- Professional communication can be misinterpreted or difficult to understand across languages and cultures
- Navigating visa requirements, employment laws, and the cost of accommodating workplace requirements can be difficult
- Different understandings of professional etiquette
- Conflicting working styles across teams

Today many companies recognise the importance of cultural intelligence. They understand that everybody needs to have cultural intelligence and researchers say its benefits are reflected in work performance. Developing your cultural intelligence will go a long way to ensure that you and your company can nimbly navigate across cultural boundaries. However, this is an important skill required to fit and thrive in the future work therefore it is important to start improving and developing your teams now.

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