
The identity trap

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Moving staff across cultures sounds glamorous – but research suggests it’s difficult for employers and employees to establish win-win situations. The secret, it appears, is managing expectations and ensuring all parties are open to new perspectives and change.

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UABR: Your current research explores how people adapt to the foreign workplaces or back into their own culture after some time away. What has your research shown about how employees can successfully make those transitions?

Tung: I’ve always been interested in the cross-culture adjustment of people who move overseas. There is a psychology researcher in Canada by the name of John Berry, who studies immigration into Canada. He has a model that has two dimensions, the first of which is the extent to which a person feels it’s important to preserve his or her own culture. For instance, as a Chinese person who migrated to Canada, there’s always a question in my mind about the extent to which I should preserve my Chinese-ness, or whether I should just be completely assimilated into the Canadian context. The second dimension is about attraction to the new culture. Let’s say even if I want to shed all my heritage, then the question becomes what attracts me to another culture and what I’m going to assimilate to.

There are several typical approaches. One approach is integration, where a person both seeks to preserve his or her culture, but is also attracted to the partner culture. If a Chinese person comes to New Zealand because he/she is attracted to what New Zealand can offer, in a sense that person identifies with New Zealand culture and wants to contribute to society. But at the same time he or she still retains his/her heritage, because there are certain values within the Chinese culture that would be very positive in the workplace, such as being hard working and persistent. So integration tends to be the most functional approach.

The second effective approach is assimilation, in which

you give up your own culture and just completely adapt to the New Zealand culture. Other approaches typically have less positive outcomes, such as separation, with foreigners living and working, for example, in communities where they only speak their native language. The employer doesn’t benefit and for the individual there is really a lot of isolation – so why bother being there in the first place?

The most dysfunctional form of interaction is marginalisation, where the immigrant or expatriate doesn’t like the culture and the culture rejects him or her. There are tragic stories about the Aboriginal (First Nations, as they are called) people in Canada in the early part of the 20th century. They were told that they should shed all their values and “become white,” but at the same time they were never accepted by mainstream society.

A lot of the responsibility falls on the individual. If you’re in a foreign country and you only socialise with members of your own ethnic group, what is the value-added to you? What have you learned? Have you really absorbed anything from the new environment that you’re in? So I think it’s really open-mindedness that enables learning for all parties.

UABR: In terms of the merging of cultures in the workplace, what are the trends and traditions in other countries?

Tung: The United States has always adopted what is called the “Melting Pot” policy. The question, of course, becomes, what are you melting into? Canada has a different approach in that it promotes multi-culturalism. You’re encouraged to be a Canadian, but it’s also a hyphenated community. You might be known as an Indo-Canadian or a Chinese-Canadian. You’re asked to preserve your own cultural values. The idea is that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts, and the country becomes a lot richer as a result of multi-culturalism.

When the theme of diversity first received attention, it was called “managing diversity.” But managing means there is something inherently wrong or negative about it. It’s like when we say we want to manage absenteeism. By definition it means that absenteeism has a negative consequence upon organizational performance or functioning.

Now people talk about “celebrating diversity,” and I think that’s a lot more positive because it focuses on the unique contribution that each person brings to society. And I would say that when we talk about diversity, it’s not just ethnic differences, but also gender and other differences. If we truly celebrate diversity, then we can say that individuals or groups of people – because of their characteristics – are better suited to certain kinds of roles or positions. This can lead to better insights and decision-making in the workplace.

UABR: So what are the implications for managers?

Tung: I think diverse experiences and perspectives can really help a company build a more global mindset, and management have to be more open-minded. I know that most people would say they're open-minded, but we have to recognise our own blind spots—and I think all of us have those. In my opinion, if a person says that he/she does not have any blind spots, the individual is probably either a little bit naïve or ignorant about them. All of us have our blind spots, but sometimes we may not be aware of them.

Comparison of differences should be used as a tool for evaluation. Comparison allows us to identify our strengths and weaknesses. What I mean by open-mindedness is the ability to recognise that there are differences, and then try to take advantage or make the most of a person's distinct attributes. I think that's more of a global mindset. Consequently, from the standpoint of management, when people join a company, we need to recognise the unique contributions/additional insights that each person can bring.

For instance, a former student and I did a study on the non-financial and financial performance of banks in British Columbia. By the way, British Columbia is quite multi-cultural because 40 percent of the population in this province was born outside of Canada. We found that the multi-cultural branches, financially and non-financially, performed better than the more homogeneous branches.

UABR: In New Zealand we hear a lot about the so-called brain drain, you use the term “brain circulation.” Can you explain your thinking?

Tung: Well I didn't coin the term, but I think it's a really good way of looking at this phenomenon. When we talk about brain drain or brain gain, by definition, there are winners and losers. If we talk about brain circulation, we see that it's not a zero-sum game, that is, a diminishing pool for supply of talent. People in other countries are gathering experiences that will ultimately allow them the opportunity to contribute to the country in some way. Whether they return to their home country or not, they typically will have an affinity to their country or origin and often make investments in that country.

If we look at a small, isolated country like New Zealand that has attracted much immigration in recent years from Asia-Pacific, many of these immigrants can contribute to trade development between New Zealand and their countries of origin to take advantage of the rapid economic growth in the latter region. Witness,

for example, the phenomenal growth of both China and India – this has given rise to the new term, “Chindia”. We live in a knowledge economy where innovation is key, regardless of where it comes from. By welcoming people with different mindsets and perspectives, it can certainly facilitate the generation of new ideas to enhance the innovative capabilities of a small and isolated country.

UABR: Many New Zealanders travel and live overseas at a young age, and then experience the phenomenon of returning home to work. How can their managers and employers utilise their skills and experiences?

Tung: People who have lived and worked overseas for a while are changed individuals. In all the studies that I've done, I find that the most common frustration for returnees – or Ex-Host Country Nationals (ECHNs), as I call them – is that when they return, they are different because of their experiences abroad while those who stayed home and never left have remained the same. In the case of New Zealand, the country has changed a lot over the years. This contributes to the problem of readjustment upon return. Furthermore, many returnees are frustrated that their scope of responsibility shrinks considerably upon return home. In my studies, many expatriates say, “When I was overseas I could make multi-million dollar decisions, now I have to seek several layers of approval even for a small decision”. In other words, when they were overseas, they were “somebody”. After their return, however, they become mere cogs in the wheel. Furthermore,

these problems could be exacerbated if their family has problems in readjusting. In the case of international assignments, this lack of adjustment upon return contributes to the high rate of turnover—around 20 percent—within the first year of repatriation.

UABR: What's the best way for companies to ensure that expatriates fit into the workplace?

Tung: Realistic job preview is very important, and it's a topic that has received a lot of attention in the organisational behaviour literature. There is nothing worse than somebody finding that there's a big difference between what has been promised or expected and the actual situation. I think that's what creates a lot of problems. To benefit most from the international experience of one's employees, on the one hand, I think that employers should try to make the most use of the experiences and perspectives their employees have acquired from abroad to contribute to the global mindset of their companies. On the other hand, the returnee has to realise that their co-workers who have not gone abroad most probably wouldn't have changed much.

