

CULTURE

Workplace Culture: Challenges Away from Home

by Kelsey Chong



Workplace culture has become a key feature of the employee experience. However, as companies expand overseas, translating this company aspect across languages and cultures can be tough. Read more about how businesses can effectively encourage an international workplace culture.

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Home to tech pioneers like Facebook and Apple, the Silicon Valley has become renowned worldwide as a major hub for technological innovation and scientific development. But aside from its groundbreaking inventions, this California region is also in the international spotlight for its distinctive and effective workplace cultures. From Google's laid-back and playful campus with free food and arcades, to Netflix's competitive

atmosphere and straightforward mentality, Silicon Valley companies have each developed their own unique corporate cultures that both retain high employee satisfaction and boost overall productivity.

As Silicon Valley companies seek further success overseas by establishing international office locations, however, they are faced with the difficulties of replicating their trademark workplace atmospheres in distant regions with completely different local cultures and demographics. Global expansion is key to increasing sales, minimizing expenses, and limiting dependence on existing markets. But can companies adapt to a new and foreign environment, while also retaining the original workplace culture that led them to success?

What is Workplace Culture?

Unlike the more tangible aspects of a business like marketing strategy or R&D, workplace culture is an invisible thread that runs throughout the entire workspace and synchronizes employee behavior, beliefs, and practices. A few strategies that can contribute to a strong culture include selectively hiring employees who share the corporation's core ideals, crafting a powerful narrative and vision statement that inspire the company's philosophy, and constructing the workspace's physical layout in a way that will actively reinforce desired values like creativity or collaboration. Because employees united by a unique workplace culture feel a greater sense of belonging, they tend to express stronger company loyalty and are more motivated to contribute to the business' success. According to James L. Heskett, "effective culture can account for 20%-30% of the differential in corporate performance when compared with 'culturally unremarkable' competitors"—thus making strong workplace culture essential to success both at home and abroad.

Culture Shock

Once established, the climate of a centralized, small-scale corporate environment is easy to regulate with the proper maintenance and consistency. But as a business expands globally, it will soon discover a multitude of new variables that will upset its original workplace culture model.

One of the main, and most obvious difficulties in creating a globally consistent corporate culture is the sheer physical distance between the company headquarters and its international branches. Because of regional variances like time difference and the impersonality of digital communication, satellite employees often struggle to form close relationships with their co-workers back at headquarters. Furthermore, the lack of a common physical workspace also prevents day-to-day mingling and socializing outside of meetings. Even the subtlest of in-office interactions can play a major role in setting the mood of the workplace. An ongoing inside joke can unite employees under a shared sense of humor, and create a relaxed and playful work environment. Lively elevator exchanges and friendly lounge banter can similarly encourage a culture of teamwork and collaboration. While employees on the home campus are constantly immersed in this productive atmosphere, overseas personnel are removed from its positive influence. Consequently, employees located far away from the base of operations may begin to lose touch with the company's mission or even feel marginalized.

Another barrier to reproducing workplace culture abroad is the differences between the ethnic backgrounds, language, and local customs of the home and foreign regions. While the core values of a company may strongly resonate with its home country's culture and beliefs, those values may not resonate with another region across the globe. Netflix, for instance, was challenged with applying its blunt and candid work approach in eastern countries like Japan, where indirectness is considered a virtue. Honesty and frankness strongly align with the no-nonsense attitude of American culture, earning Netflix the 11th spot on LinkedIn's Top Attractor's list in the United States. American employees readily embrace the company's point-blank criticism, and internalize it as a motivator towards even higher success. Japanese employees, on the other hand, tended to show resistance against both giving and receiving feedback in front of large groups due to cultural unfamiliarity with such candor.

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Building Universal Corporate Identity

By taking the appropriate steps to solidify a common corporate identity, and maintain connection and uniformity between campuses, businesses can confront these geographical differences and firmly root corporate culture into offices of every region.

First, investing in company-wide events and programs can help foster a deep sense of corporate identity in employees that extends beyond any national or linguistic differences. In-house company programs and off-site training allow employees to develop a shared experience and company-specific language. Activities like company picnics, performances, and sporting events can also build a feeling of togetherness and camaraderie by providing a fun space for co-workers to interact outside of the office.

Company exclusive online networks and communities can also help bridge the physical distance between office locations around the world and reinforce a singular corporate culture. Keeping a company blog that features recent news can keep employees up to date on other locations or departments, and make a large-scale corporation feel more accessible from any end of the globe. Sending regular newsletters highlighting individuals' achievements or sharing interesting stories from the workplace can additionally help influence how satellite employees view the company, and reinforce the core values of the firm. Company collaboration tools like Yammer, which allow employees to chat and share pictures with fellow co-workers, can also further maintain a corporate atmosphere filled with constant interaction and the exchange of ideas, even across continents.

Keeping consistency in office layout and regulations are also vital to ensuring an internationally homogenous corporate culture. In order to avoid feelings of hostility and exclusion between locations, company campuses across the world should all offer the same amenities and provide equal treatment. Similarly, each country's office should also maintain the same international regulation standards for company benefits like vacation days. If only the headquarters or larger offices are offered more days of leave or special high-end food and sports facilities, smaller offices will likely feel overlooked. Conversely, if all offices big and small are provided with the same exact services, perks, and amenities, employees around the world will feel acknowledged as an important part of the corporation, and be more motivated to collaborate with other locations.

Finally, appointing a local leader to advise each international office can be an effective strategy to localize workplace culture, without the potential risks of an expatriate assignment. While sending an expatriate from headquarters to recreate workplace culture on international campuses may seem like the most obvious solution, expatriate assignments can often result in excessive costs, language barriers, regrettable departures, issues with sudden changes in visa restrictions, and extreme stress from moving abroad. On the other hand, hiring local leaders allows for long-term succession planning, as well as readily available knowledge of the given region's culture, language, and business environment. In accordance with the successful strategies of firms like PepsiCo and Microsoft, these local leaders can first be sent overseas to the headquarters for special training and immersion in the company's corporate culture. Upon return to their home country, they can then utilize their regional expertise to smoothly incorporate company goals into the workplace, without disregarding local values or aggressively imposing on employees' behavior.



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