A Question of Cultural Diversity at Work

As a bicultural person, how can I use my unique skills to help me perform at work?

by Dr. Stacey Fitzsimmons

If you’re part of the 40 per cent of Canada’s population who will be immigrants or the children of immigrants by 2050, you might identify with more than one culture. For example, you may see yourself as Chinese-Canadian, Arab-Canadian or Brazilian-Canadian.

As a bicultural person, there are absolutely ways in which you can use your unique skills to help you perform at work. Gustavson professor David Thomas, Echo Liao (BSE Business School), and I decided to find out how.** We ran three studies with a total of 1,196 participants to find out how bicultural employees contribute to their workplaces.

We discovered that many bicultural people keep one foot in each of their cultures, giving them special knowledge that lets them effectively communicate with people with one culture (“monoculturals,” in our lingo). Here are a few work activities in which bicultural employees tend to perform especially well.

COMMUNICATION BONUS

Most obviously, many biculturals know more than one language, so are able to help with casual translation inside or outside the workplace. Beyond language skills, bicultural employees are often skilled at adapting to cross-cultural situations. They’ve grown up learning how to change their behaviours to fit different cultural environments.

For example, a Chinese-German person will probably be able to switch between communicating directly (common in Germany) and speaking more indirectly (common in China), depending on the audience. If you have this skill, you can rely on it to help you perform within global teams or when working with clients.

SOLVING COMPLEX INTERNATIONAL PROBLEMS

Compared to monoculturals, who have only one cultural lens as a reference, biculturals can often analyze international issues at a deeper level.

For example, a French-Irish Burbam team member was working for L’Oréal on the development of skin care products for the French market. He saw the opportunity to combine variable reducing features with tinted makeup, something his French colleagues had not considered.**

He was able to combine his insider knowledge of both Cambodian and French beauty products to create a successful new product.

If you’re bicultural, try to use your cultural lenses to think differently about your next work project. You might discover that you can draw on your cultural identities to build creative new solutions.

CONNECTING PEOPLE

In one multinational technology company, bicultural individuals helped software development teams overcome serious challenges that threatened their projects.*** These teams had members in the US, Germany and India. When delicate communication was necessary, bicultural individuals excelled at connecting their teammates across cultures.

If you can see that you have work or friend connections that cross cultural boundaries, you might be able to use your connections to change the social network at your organization. You can help to connect people who would not otherwise be connected.

THE DOWNSIDE: PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

Despite the advantages of being bicultural, there are also challenges. Bicultural employees often say it’s hard to answer the question: “Who am I?” For many, it’s difficult to make sense of conflicting sets of values, norms, assumptions and expected behaviours from their different cultures.

The silver lining to this challenge is that the process of thinking deeply about how to make sense of your own cultures can help you become even better at integrating multiple perspectives to solve international problems.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOU?

Organizations everywhere are facing a labour force and a customer base that is increasingly culturally diverse. Working effectively across cultures is now a fundamental requirement for today’s business people. As a bicultural individual, you can use your multiple identities to excel.

