



## The value of bicultural individuals to organisations

**How do companies improve operationally with diverse and talented workforces? By taking advantage of individuals who feel at home in multiple cultures, says INSEAD visiting professor Mary Yoko Brannen.**

Crisscrossing cultures and geographies within an organisation is routine in a globalised workforce, whether it's through working with foreign-born colleagues or through work-related travel. But it's not without challenges – managing diverse teams can be arduous when you factor in cultural, communication and educational differences, for instance. How do companies improve operationally with a diverse, talented workforce without losing operational efficiencies through overcoming cultural barriers?

They could utilise the inherent skills of individuals socialised in more than one culture, says Mary Yoko Brannen, a visiting professor of strategy at INSEAD. 'Bicultural' and multicultural individuals who have deeply internalised more than one culture, are likely to have more pronounced intercultural skills than 'monoculturals', says Brannen, and are under-utilised in organisations. "They are very good at adapting, sensing differences, understanding others and brokering across cultural contexts." Simply put, they *bridge cultures*.

A bicultural Chinese-American, for instance, will likely be familiar with the customs and rituals of the two respective cultures, and may have a better grasp of perceptions, behaviour and expectations in social and organisational structures. But it's not just

within their own home contexts – biculturals and multiculturals can translate their experiences to other cultural situations, Brannen's research indicates. Neither ethnicity nor spoken language is key to being bicultural or multicultural, she explains, as much of culture is beneath the skin's surface and much of language is tacit and can also be interpreted by someone who has been deeply socialised in more than one culture.

### Identifying biculturals

Companies can do well to leverage the skills that biculturals and multiculturals offer, says Brannen. With increasingly complex organisations, the ubiquity of virtual teams and worldwide transfers of knowledge and people, individuals who can mediate between and within organisations become vital, she argues. Multinationals, for instance, have to manage their institutional culture in a variety of contexts – a home context, a host context, dealing with local governments, and globally-integrated industries, all at the same time.

"We need *bridgers*," says Brannen. "We need people who are flexible and adaptive, who have a certain personal autonomy and can stay emotionally resilient." The common assumption instead is that organisations need to match culture-specific skills or

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**  
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

language skills with what they require.

Brannen's research has uncovered different ways in which people experience their multiculturalism. To date, her work has uncovered four major types of biculturals.

The *both/and* category refers to individuals who have fully integrated their bicultural identities and retain specific knowledge of both cultures as a result. They might be fluent in two languages and may know a lot about both national contexts – within organisations, they can bridge culture specific knowledge, explains Brannen.

The *'neither/nor'* category represents those who grew up on the periphery of two cultures but are accepted by neither. Not feeling a full sense of belonging in either place but wanting desperately to fit in, these biculturals naturally grow up paying acute attention to their surrounding environments. "Oftentimes, your only choice is to be an observer in both, so you develop very good observational skills, says Brannen. "This is very valuable – this is called *perceptual acuity*."

*Either/ors* are individuals who switch back and forward between their home cultures. These cultural chameleons tend to have the most cultural meta-cognition, says Brannen, and are able to apply different frameworks to a variety of different situations as a result.

Lastly, there's the *one-home* category: someone who is, say, third-generation Korean-American, doesn't speak Korean, has never been to Korea, identifies mostly with one culture (in this case, American), but is sensitive to the cultural differences.

Brannen further commented that many biculturals have experienced what she terms "existential angst"—a social-psychological conflict around who they are. Although this is a challenge for people with multicultural socialization, the upside of this is that individuals who experience conflicts in their cultural identity development have significantly higher levels of perception. As such, these individuals can be adept at deciphering and breaking down cultural complexity in multinational corporations.

Understanding that people with multicultural identities offer vital skill sets is critical for organisations to be able to leverage better what these valuable employees bring to today's global companies.

## Improving organisations

In order to harness the diversity of bicultural and multicultural individuals, companies must first find a

Visit INSEAD Knowledge  
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

way of assessing their workforce, explains Brannen, and then of improving the way they match skills with functions. Additionally, they can draw from an understanding of biculturals and multiculturals to develop a global leadership training programme for monoculturals. A second instance where this can prove useful is in improving the abilities of another type of modern-day worker – the global cosmopolitan. This individual is adaptable and can relocate easily across the globe without feeling overwhelmed, but at the same time might lack a deep understanding of the host culture. "Whereas they have a certain skill set (allowing them) to be dropped into another culture and hit the ground running, it doesn't mean they are able to handle complex contextual issues. The 'existential angst' that biculturals and multiculturals often experience makes them more keenly aware of these issues."

Companies can indeed miss out on opportunities by failing to recognise and exploit biculturalism and multicultural identity as an important strategic human resource. For instance, the United States stopped investing in the facsimile industry on the expectation of email overtaking the fax. A bad move, Brannen points out. "We wouldn't have made that wrong call if we'd had tapped the tacit knowledge of biculturals in that industry who might have been able to caution that there are parts of the world where hand-written, plain paper copy faxes are going to continue to be important," she says. "That's perceptual acuity." As for cellphones, many parts of the world surpassed the US in usage and technology for the simple reason that many parts of the world didn't have landlines.

"Diversity can oftentimes slow down processes but if the diversity is understood and utilised for creativity and for helping mobilise change, it has to (move in the same) direction as the task at hand."

### Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/the-value-of-bicultural-individuals-to-organisations-855>

### Download the Knowledge app for free

