

## Why you need Cultural Brokers in your company

Having employees with multicultural background who are able to bridge diverse worlds will make your organization more successful. They make advantage of team diversity and enhance creative performance.

**What is a cultural broker?** The term originated in the field of anthropology in the mid-1990s. Originally used to describe native Americans working in the western society as cultural intermediaries, it has been discussed in a number of areas (business, education, ethno-history, etc.). The common usage considers a cultural broker as someone who bridges, links and mediates between people or groups of different cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change. A more recent definition considers cultural brokerage as the act of facilitating interactions between individuals across cultural boundaries. Moving to another country or knowing more than one language does not necessarily make you multicultural. The study of Jang (2017) considered participants multicultural if they had lived in two different countries for at least 5 years and if they possessed a high knowledge level of the corresponding culture (assessed with a research-based test). Other studies consider second generation immigrants to possess this knowledge, too (cf. Jara, 2018).

## Why are cultural brokers relevant to business?

Studies show that diverse teams achieve greater financial returns, they are more productive, communicative and creative. They have access to a richer amount of knowledge, different perspectives and ideas from various cultures in comparison to monolingual teams. Professionals who experienced different cultures usually have a learning-oriented mindset and a problem-solving approach, since they had to develop a skillset to face the complexity of their changing life and work experience. Cultural diversity, however, can also function as a barrier: different cultural beliefs and norms and making false assumptions can result in misunderstanding.

**How does it actually work?** Multiculturals possess both culture-specific knowledge and culture-general skills, such as the ability to accept different perspectives and combine them into a coherent whole or the ability to think about one's cultural assumptions. Cultural brokerage can take many forms. Jang (2017) examined how each team member's cultural background interacts with the cultural composition of the team and even shape team dynamics and outcomes.

She distinguishes between cultural insiders (people who share the cultural background of some or all members in a team), and cultural outsiders (those who share the cultural background of none of the team members). When interacting within the team, cultural insiders use integrating strategies, i.e. putting together or synthesizing information, ideas, knowledge from different cultures into a novel one. Cultural outsiders prefer to use eliciting strategies: seeking or requesting relevant cultural information or knowledge of other team members, in order to make it accessible to all members. This makes it necessary to know what kind of information to elicit, from whom and who to share it with and when, and this demands high levels of cultural metacognition. Jang's study results suggest that having multiculturals, both insiders and outsiders, enhance the creative performance of culturally diverse teams, and they do so by improving team processes and by increasing the average level of individual creativity within the team.

**Implications for organizations.** Individuals with multicultural background have the tendency to help their monocultural counterparts. Recognizing that such dynamics are taking place is fundamental. Cultural brokers need time and space to recognize their role and organizations should create the conditions that can allow them to emerge. Being a cultural broker requires cognitive and emotional effort, therefore they emerge in teams with a high level of psychological safety, and which view diversity as a resource and a source of learning.

**Literature:** Jang, S. (2017). Cultural brokerage and creative performance in multicultural teams. *Organization Science*, vol. 28, pp. 993-1009. | Szasz, M. C. (2001). *Between Indians and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker*. University of Oklahoma Press. | Brimm, L. (2019). The skills that global cosmopolitans bring to the table. *INSEAD Knowledge*. | Jara, Y. (2018). How second-generation immigrants are transforming the landscape of Spanish society. In: *El País*.



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