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Global Strategy

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Photo by Christine Roy

According to a recent McKinsey Global Institute report, the number of people in the global labor force will reach 3.5 billion by 2030 — and yet there will still be a shortage of skilled workers. The result is likely to be intensified global competition for talent. Rather than assuming we'll work in one location, in our native culture, we will need new skills, attitudes, and behaviors that help us work across cultures. Our ways of thinking about careers, colleagues, and collaboration will need to become more flexible and adaptable. My five-year study of the global

workforce at Rakuten, the Japan-based e-commerce powerhouse, gave me a close-up look at what will drive success for this new type of global worker.

Prior to 2010, Rakuten had been a multilingual global company. The Japanese employees in the Tokyo headquarters communicated in Japanese, the Americans in the U.S. subsidiary spoke English, and the workers in Asia, Europe, and South America spoke a mixture of native languages. Translators were employed for cross-border communications. What's more, the subsidiaries operated more or less autonomously, each with separate organizational cultures and norms. But in 2010, Rakuten mandated an English-only policy for its workforce of over 10,000 employees.

The CEO, Hiroshi Mikitani, realized that doing business in multiple languages prevented the organization from sharing valuable knowledge across the organization's existing global operations, as well as those that were being newly established. The company also aspired to raise the overseas portion of its revenue in response to the projected shrinking of the Japanese GDP as a portion of global GDP (from 12% in 2006 to 3% in 2050) and wanted to expand its global talent pool. Above all, the company aspired to become the number one internet services company in the world. The English language, Mikitani predicted, could revolutionize both how Rakuten employees worked and how they interacted with the rest of the world.

The English language mandate, however, set off all sorts of linguistic and cultural challenges. These challenges differed depending on people's backgrounds and location. Two groups had the steepest learning curve in particular. The Japanese employees, while already fluent with Japanese concepts such as *kaizen* (improvement) and *omotenashi* (hospitality), struggled to become proficient in English. The

American employees, who were fluent in English, struggled to become comfortable with new work routines and expectations from Japan.

The employees who had to adjust to both a new language *and* a new culture — whom I've named dual expats in their own countries — had the easiest transition when it came to working under the new conditions of the company's English-only mandate. They hailed from countries as diverse as Brazil, France, Germany, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Thailand, and all demonstrated the characteristics of what I call *global work orientation*. This type of orientation can be incredibly valuable to cultivate for anyone working for multinationals or in other global careers, and can also be used by managers to develop employees. It consists of five key actions.

1. Embracing positive indifference. Positive indifference is the ability to overlook many cultural differences as being not especially important or worthy of attention, while remaining optimistic about the process of engaging the culture seen as foreign. It's about adapting to work practices that may at first seem culturally foreign — such as having to wear an identification badge or file frequent key performance indicator reports — without becoming unduly troubled.

Positive indifference is important for two reasons. One, because global work is by definition likely to bring employees into contact with cultural differences and culturally diverse practices, the ability to adapt smartly could be the difference between success and failure. And two, positive indifference makes work life that much easier in a global firm because employees are open to learning and exploring new terrains.

2. Seeking commonality between cultures. This enables you and your employees to draw closer to a foreign culture and become receptive to its differences, in line with characteristic number one. The

commonalities you find may be different from anyone else's and not initially obvious. For example, a French employee at Rakuten found commonality with his Japanese coworkers by recognizing that both cultures are results-oriented and prone to analyzing processes for how they could be improved. An Indonesian engineer found commonality with Rakuten's requirement that employees spend five minutes per week cleaning their desks by comparing it to his practice of washing his feet and hands when entering a mosque. In his mind, both cleaning rituals demonstrated commitment and responsibility to a particular place. Seeking commonality is important to a global work orientation because it draws colleagues from diverse cultures closer, which in turn translates to more effective collaboration and teamwork.

3. Identifying with the global organization rather than your local office. If you feel a sense of belonging with the larger organization, you're more likely to share its values and goals. *Organizational identification*, the term for when an individual feels at one with the organization, is crucial for fostering job satisfaction, commitment, and performance. Here's how an Indonesian employee at Rakuten voiced this behavior: "From my perspective, if I'm doing my job, I'm becoming part of the globalization of the company." Identifying with the global organization, in his mind, was synonymous with the collective international company and its further expansion.

Explicit messaging from the top leaders about the company's global expansion also helped spread people's sense of belonging in the superordinate organization, as did instituting an internal social media site to promote cross-national interactions.

4. Seeking interactions with other, geographically distant subsidiaries. The dual expats, unlike employees from Japan and the United States, welcomed and sought out increased interactions

with employees at other Rakuten locations. Brazil reported the largest extent of these self-reported voluntary interactions at nearly 52%. In comparison, the U.S., which had the lowest voluntary interactions with other subsidiaries, hovered around 2%.

This behavior is important to global work orientation because, my research finds, in general, when interactions are high, there is a greater ability to develop trust and shared vision among international coworkers. Interactions are also vital for sharing knowledge across sites. As such, tacit knowledge can become more explicit; sharing information or best practices can become advantageous; and learning from one another's common experiences can accelerate the spread of business efficiencies across the global organization. As a Thai employee pointed out in discussing the implications of the rapidly expanding internet business in his country: "Learning from other countries, especially other developing countries, is very, very key."

5. Aspiring to a global career. In some sectors, the global market demands for English-speaking workers makes a global career quite attractive. Travel, living in a new country, and the opportunities for career advancement that may come with working for a multinational firm were all reasons that dual expats gave for their global career aspirations. Some people I interviewed had entertained long-standing aspirations to work globally, while others had this dream kindled as they learned English. The desire to learn English and work abroad seemed to reinforce one another. "It'll be great for me to have the chance to go to another country, to work in another country. It's definitely something I want to do in the future — when my English is better," said a Taiwanese employee.

These five attitudes and behaviors are what make a successful global employee. Perhaps you have already adopted some, or all, in your

current work role. Or maybe you're looking for ways to advance your career in a multinational. In either case, we can all learn from Rakuten's dual expats, who are a model for present and future global workers.

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