

MANAGING YOURSELF

# What Makes You “Multicultural”

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You’ve heard about multicultural societies and groups, but have you thought about multicultural *individuals* and what they bring to organizations? Multicultural individuals — such as Chinese-Canadians, Turkish-Germans, or Arab-Americans — commonly think, perceive, behave, and respond to global workplace issues in more complex ways than monocultural individuals.

Some multicultural individuals translate these differences into career success. For example, a study of [100 Israeli managers working in Silicon Valley](#) found that Israeli-American managers thought in

more complex ways than managers who saw themselves as belonging to only Israeli or only American cultures. As a result, peers rated them as more competent managers and they were promoted faster.

Many people are confused about whether they are multicultural. Does having immigrant parents or grandparents, working internationally, or living in a multicultural city mean that you are multicultural?

It's a question that even experts find hard to answer, because multiculturalism is defined in so many different ways. For example, some researchers argue that residents of [Hong Kong](#) are multicultural because of its colonial history. In contrast, others define multicultural individuals by their ability to function effectively in more than one culture, [such as knowing multiple languages](#) or having "[multicultural minds](#)," meaning they can think in ways that reflect multiple cultures.

[As a six-person international team](#) representing 16 cultures, we decided to resolve this confusion by consolidating the best parts of all previous definitions. In doing so, we recognized that people can be multicultural to varying degrees. After reading 183 articles in fields ranging from sociology, anthropology, and psychology — as well as management and marketing — we define multiculturalism within individuals as the degree to which they know, identify with, and internalize more than one culture.

Answer the following questions on each dimension to assess your level of multiculturalism. Think about culture in a broad sense: It includes national cultures, societal cultures that span nations (e.g., Arab culture), regional cultures within nations (e.g., Bengali and Punjabi cultures in India), hybrid, and intersecting cultures (e.g., Métis indigenous culture).

### **How much knowledge do you have about each of your cultures?**

Does your knowledge of your cultures go beyond “book learning”? How much do you know about their values, underlying cultural assumptions, beliefs, and typical behaviors? How familiar are you with their histories, heroes, traditions, customs, and social institutions? How fluent are you in their languages? If asked about these cultures, how many unique, culture-specific points can you come up with in a few minutes? Use your answers to place yourself on this dimension, using the spectrum of possibilities listed below.

- Monocultural: High level of knowledge of one culture
- Slightly multicultural: High level of knowledge about one culture and moderate knowledge about another culture
- Moderately multicultural: High level of knowledge of more than one culture
- Highly multicultural: high level of knowledge of more than two cultures

Your level of multicultural knowledge is particularly useful for accomplishing cross-cultural tasks. For example, consider Hidé, a [Japanese-American employee in a U.S. subsidiary of a Japanese firm](#). Hidé knew that head office messages might confuse their American customers, because they used a

structure common in Japan, starting with peripheral information and only eventually getting to the main issue. Instead of passing the translated messages on verbatim, Hidé used his multicultural knowledge to rewrite them more directly, resulting in a better reception among customers.

So if you have in-depth knowledge of more than one culture, you can use it to enable cross-cultural understanding in your firm.

### **How much do you identify with more than one culture?**

People who identify with more than one culture often find it difficult to answer the question: “Where are you from?” How many cultures come to mind when you respond? Do you say “we” (as opposed to “they”) when talking about these groups? When someone criticizes these groups, do you feel personally offended? Use your answers to place yourself on this identification dimension.

- Monocultural: Identify with one cultural group
- Slightly multicultural: Identify primarily with one culture, and to a lesser extent with another culture
- Moderately multicultural: Identify strongly with more than one culture
- Highly multicultural: Identify with more than two cultures

Identification with more than one culture can help facilitate connections with others, including relationships across firms. For example, compared to British employees of a U.K.-based pharmaceutical firm, the firm’s Chinese-British employees [used their dual cultural identities](#) to develop better trust with employees at new Chinese partner firms. The trusting relationships Chinese-British employees created with employees from both their British employer and the Chinese partner firm ultimately helped them build successful alliances between their firms.

If you identify with more than one cultural group, you can draw on your network to connect people across your cultures.

### **How much have you internalized more than one culture?**

To answer this question, examine your values, beliefs, and assumptions. This is hard; we are often not aware of how culture shapes these deepest parts of ourselves. To what extent do different cultures influence your value systems? Do you think about issues from the perspective of more than one culture? Do they influence how you feel? How much do you use values, beliefs, and assumptions from more than one culture when making decisions? Do you find yourself unconsciously engaging in different cultural behaviors depending on the situation? Use your answers to place yourself on this internalization dimension.

- Monocultural: Internalized one culture
- Slightly multicultural: Internalized one primary culture and a second culture to a lesser extent
- Moderately multicultural: Fully internalized more than one culture
- Highly multicultural: Fully internalized more than two cultures

When you've internalized more than one culture, it can help you develop more complex thinking skills and innovative solutions to problems. When people intimately understand more than one cultural system, they see new ways to combine them, leading to innovations. For example, a [French-Irish-Cambodian L'Oréal employee](#) was tasked with developing skin-care products for the French market. He understood better than his French colleagues that the French product development process was hampered by its sharp category definitions. While his French colleagues saw makeup and skincare as separate categories, this employee saw the opportunity to combine these categories, as is done in Asia. He therefore introduced a tinted and lifting cream to the French market, where it quickly became popular. Even such a seemingly simple change is often difficult because our cultural beliefs frame the categories we see in the world.

If you have internalized more than one culture, you can try to use it to help you create innovative solutions to your international workplace dilemmas.

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Combine all three of your answers to the above questions to determine your level of multiculturalism. If your answers placed you beyond "monocultural" on all three dimensions, then you have some level of multiculturalism that you could use to help you accomplish cross-cultural tasks, connect people, and develop creative solutions.

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