DISARMING CULTURE TRAPS

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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes the findings of a pilot study investigating how employers unwittingly limit their ability to capitalize on immigrant employee talent. Groups of managers, human resource professionals, and skilled immigrants that were interviewed revealed practices intended to foster high performance that seem to do the opposite. Responses of employees with different cultural norms and workplace expectations may result in suboptimal outcomes for the employer, including employee turnover. It is proposed that managers learn self-awareness and be mindful of the impacts of workplace practices, and adapt current practices so as to reveal hidden talent in immigrant employees and maximize organizational capacity.

INTRODUCTION

The aging of Canada's workforce has prompted several immigration policy shifts to attract immigrant skilled professionals and entrepreneurs, and to encourage international students to apply for permanent residence. Employment and training programs for immigrants work to prepare them for and help them to obtain jobs commensurate with their competencies and credentials. Immigrant candidates can get help with language and culture, job search, and job matching. Collaboration among service provider organizations (SPO), communities, and governments is building a network of support for successful employment outcomes across Canada. Similar programs are available for employers facing skills shortages, so they are better equipped to attract and hire qualified immigrant talent.

To compete in world markets, Canadian employers must be able to retain qualified talent and to position them in line for promotion into management and leadership positions. The promise of immigrant talent for Canadian business cannot be fully realized until employers recognize and minimize the bias inherent in their talent management practices.

In interviews with middle managers, human resource professionals, and skilled immigrants, two areas of talent management were identified as critical to the retention and advancement of immigrant employees: (i) employee engagement and (ii) performance appraisal. The role of managers as facilitators of employee networks also emerged as a key factor in the success of immigrants in the workplace.

TALENT MANAGEMENT TO FOSTER PERFORMANCE AND RETENTION

Talent management comprises a number of different activities aimed at strategic management of employee skills and competencies, and is intended to engender a sense of belonging and commitment to the organization as well as self-efficacy for career development.

Talent management practices identified by participants tended to be those considered "good practices" for employee engagement and performance appraisal. These practices are embedded in corporate culture and are among those taught as effective tools for fostering productivity in individuals and teams. They have been reinforced and passed on through generations, and are used as a matter of course. It is noteworthy that the use of these practices was not viewed by any of the participants as overtly discriminatory, even when they resulted in marginalization of immigrant employees. Unintended outcomes occurred because the cultural norms and expectations of the managers were different from those of the immigrant employees.

We found this result intriguing because of the common assumption that it is prejudice that leads to employee marginalization, a cause which prompts calls for social justice and employment equity legislation solutions. This study suggests that culture-bound behaviours and expectations of the manager, the organization, and the immigrant employee jointly create unwanted outcomes. Although everyone has good intentions, they fall into "culture traps" because neither managers nor immigrant employees understand the power of cultural norms.

For example, in Canadian organizations, employees are expected to show 'initiative' and showcase their achievements. It is a behavioural norm that Canadian employees tend to understand and anticipate, even without anyone articulating it. Those from a different cultural background, with different expectations about the role of the manager in recognizing employee competencies and contribution to the organization, may have difficulty being and feeling valued. These employees may be undervalued and overlooked for training, development and promotion—facing the "sticky floor". The cost to employers of sticky floors is lost productivity and employee turnover. The replacement costs of employees who leave are prohibitive (Holden 2011), and finding qualified replacements is getting ever more difficult because of the global competition for talent. Not only do employees leave employers, but they also leave the country – 40% of skilled and professional male immigrants leave Canada permanently within 10 years of arrival (Griffiths, 2008).

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The direct manager is the key to influencing an employee's level of engagement (Gibbons, 2006), and is particularly important in the engagement and retention of immigrant employees. Chrobot-Mason (2004) found that managers who exhibit *diversity role behaviours*—such as making the attempt to get to know their employees and showing an interest in them personally; and being mindful of and removing barriers, such as language, that exclude some employees—tend to develop relationships with employees characterized by trust and mutual sharing. Nishii and Mayer (2009) found that in an inclusive workplace, trust between employees and the manager has a positive impact on the relationship between diversity and turnover.

In our research, several practices were identified that are not intended to be exclusionary, but that can create distance and distrust between employees and managers. A simple example noted several times in interviews was the tendency for managers to pass by an employee in the hall, while nodding and smiling and asking "how are you," and then continuing down the hall without stopping to hear the response. In North America, this is simply a greeting ritual that signals polite acknowledgement of another's presence, and may not be an invitation to talk about how that person is. It is one of the ways that people in North America display respect when encountering others. For employees from a different culture, respect may be demonstrated by a greeting that displays genuine interest in the well-being of the employee and his or her family. If immigrant employees do not understand North American expectations, they may either believe the greeting is an invitation to begin a conversation or they might be offended because the question about their wellbeing seems insincere (Manning and Engelking 2010).

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

It can be tough to be from a culture where harmony is a primary goal in society when the workplace culture in North America rewards those who are perceived as aggressive and demanding (Judge, Livingston, and Hurst, forthcoming). Both informal and formal evaluation practices in Canada are informed by culture, yet we typically are not aware that we are following the implicit rules of our culture or how this impacts our ability to effectively and fairly evaluate the skills and competencies of employees from different cultures. Consequently, both formal and informal evaluation mechanisms can result in undervaluing immigrant skills and competencies.

In formal evaluation situations, managers may feel frustrated because an employee has difficulty articulating an achievement. It is expected that individuals "own" their achievements and accomplishments and are ready to share them as proof that they stand out in the crowd (a positive attribute in Canadian workplaces). Yet, a reluctance to broadcast accomplishments should not be assumed to reflect an actual lack of accomplishment or weakness. To better assess the accomplishments of employees, managers can ask probing questions, for example, "Can you recall an incident while working on the XX project where you demonstrated cooperation with your colleagues?" (Manning and Engelking 2010a).

Informal performance appraisal is also fraught with potential culture traps. Individual verbal contributions of ideas, opinions and questions are highly valued in Canadian business, and this is often at odds with the cultural norms of immigrant employees. There are a number of ways managers can foster more contributions. They can provide a clear description of what it expected, and for example, invite employees to share ideas, opinions and questions by email to the manager personally, especially before meetings. Managers can even let employees know that they will solicit employee ideas and opinions beforehand.

ORGANIZATIONAL NETWORKS

Access to networks in the workplace was identified as a barrier in every single focus group and interview. Managers who help employees develop social capital within the organization make a major contribution to employees' performance potential and sense of belonging. Two of the forms of social capital identified by Coleman (1988) are relevant here:

- obligations, expectations and trustworthiness of structures—which refers to the understanding that if one does something for someone else, they can trust that their actions will be reciprocated sometime in the future
- information that is inherent in the network – which refers to the idea that people within the network can take advantage of the resources that others have, such as knowledge, skills and other forms of human capital

Each of us holds various resources that may be useful to others, and likewise, we can benefit from the resources of those in our networks. When employees are able to leverage their own resources to make use of others', the likelihood of high performance is greater. But in order for this to happen, employees must be able to access resources from the network that can help them meet their objectives (Hatala 2007).

Lack of access to social networks in an organization affects immigrant employees in at least two ways. Their performance is limited by their inability to draw on resources embedded in other employees. And they are likely to be overlooked for training and promotion in favour of someone who is better connected. Facilitating social capital for employees will tend to improve performance.

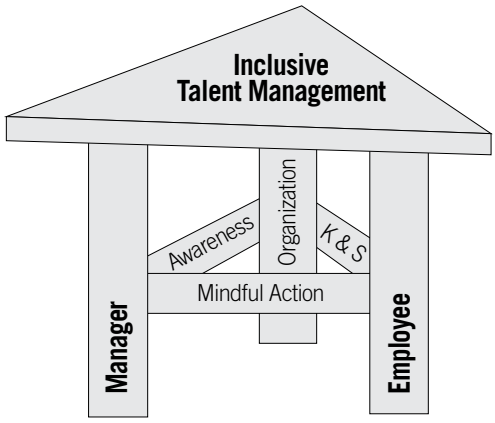
MANAGER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Considerable resources are allocated for the training and development of immigrants to ensure employability and access to the labour market. While employment levels continue to be lower than the general population, they are certainly high enough for us to consider what happens after the hiring process. Immigrant employees tend to be lower paid, are promoted less frequently, and experience higher rates of termination than the general population. In our investigation of workplace practices, we found that managers, while not deliberately biased, continue to use practices informed by Canadian culture without awareness of the inherent bias embedded in those practices. Canadian organizational culture reinforces these practices through rewards and compensation.

The manager plays a significant role in the engagement and performance appraisal of employees, and with training, can become instrumental in improving retention and advancement of immigrants. However, it is important to remember that the practices currently in use have been developed as "good practices" over a long period of time and have been passed on through generations of managers. Changing this type of engrained behaviour is difficult to accomplish, especially in light of organizational constraints imposed by a company's culture. Managers participating in our study reported concerns about penalties for changing their practices.

Although an organization can limit a manager's ability to change practices, when managers are able to overcome this hurdle and begin making small changes, they have the power to impact the organizational culture. To foster changes in talent management practices, we recommend a comprehensive training approach for managers that will affect the manager, the organization, and immigrant employees. The training should start with awareness building—beginning with awareness of cultural norms that drive certain behaviours and expectations of individuals. This awareness will motivate efforts to change behaviours.

A common method of motivating employers to become more inclusive is to use social justice and employment equity legislation. However, it is difficult to engage employees on the strength of a social justice argument. This is because these arguments imply that the goal is to retain immigrants because it is the "right thing to do," a position that is typically met with limited enthusiasm from employers. Compliance with legislation tends to motivate employers to meet requirements, but it does not motivate them to do more. The most substantial argument in favour of changing workplace practices is the need to retain and develop employees in order to maximize organizational capacity. To that end, managers need training that, in addition to increasing awareness, builds situation-specific skills that can be applied on a daily basis. Manager development requires a final stage of mindful action whereby they practice new skills, testing them and learning what works for them, until over time, the new behaviours replace the old ones automatically.



An inclusive workplace can be viewed as a three-legged stool, supported equally by adaptation by the immigrant employee, the manager, and the organization. These "legs" are held together by mutual learning in the form of awareness building, development of knowledge and skills (K&S), and the practice of mindful action.

CONCLUSIONS

Although immigrants receive support from a variety of sources to adapt to Canadian workplace culture, their employment success continues to be limited by employer practices that inhibit recognition of their competencies, their engagement, and their access to networks to achieve their goals. Differences in cultural norms create culture traps that harm the immigrant employee, the manager's performance, and the organization's capacity. A focus on employer engagement and training is recommended that includes awareness building, development of knowledge and skills, and mindful action.

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