

The 'so what' on Cultural Intelligence and the career professional

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...when Cultural Intelligence (CI) is integrated into practice, career professionals achieve greater client results

During October 2010, the Association of Career Professionals International hosted an international cruise conference entitled, *A New World Market: Global Positioning for the Career Profession.*¹ Metaphorically speaking, a cruise ship sailing to various ports of call suggests a journey many career professionals would take during these turbulent economic times, particularly if they support clients in a global job search. One of the themes that anchored (pun intended), the content of this conference, was engagement of the global talent pool; that is strategies for inclusion and employment integration of internationally educated professionals (IEPs).

Consider then, these three typical scenarios that career consultants in western countries encounter each day, when their client pool includes IEPs:

1. An unemployed and highly skilled IEP client tells her career consultant that she had found team meetings very difficult in her previous position. This client knew at some level that contributing was expected, but she simply did not feel able. No one asked her to contribute directly and she was already uncomfortable with what she perceived as so much disrespect to the manager. Not long after that meeting, her contract reached its term and it was not renewed.
2. An IEP client tells his career consultant that he had not ever had the chance to choose a career and was looking forward to exploring his career options.
3. An employer relates that his staff feel as if they need to 'baby-sit' a new IEP employee. The employee needs to be told to do every step...no initiative at all! As a result, hiring other IEPs in a growth industry desperate for new talent is not likely to happen again.

The factors behind these behaviours could be personality, skills and/or a cultural lens on how work is performed around the world. My focus is on the latter. Each of the organisations in the above scenarios lost out on opportunities to bring much-needed skills to their workplaces—all because they lacked the Cultural Intelligence (CI) to effectively accommodate diverse IEPs from diverse backgrounds. IEP employees themselves, miss out on opportunities to apply their skills productively to new settings.

The challenge is for career professionals to educate workplace stakeholders regarding the need and business case for accommodating diversity.

But why even bother when a workweek is already too busy? It's simple really. CI makes diversity and inclusion initiatives a positive force for enhancing client performance and economic growth. And diversity of perspective supports innovation which in turn, supports competitiveness and economic development.

This article discusses the demographic economics which make CI an important management tool, presents an overview of CI and finally, shows how it can be applied.

DEMOGRAPHIC ECONOMICS

In 1998 Peter Drucker² suggested that demographics, more than economics or technology, would be the dominant factor for business over the next two decades. The past twelve years have borne out his thinking on under-population and the need to improve productivity.

Drucker's insight into the effects of 'under population' on the economy, provides a conceptual link between the necessity for immigration and developing the future talent pool. The

business case for diversity is that giving the best talent access to the broadest markets will produce the greatest results. The Toronto region has that talent. Toronto's immigrants are well educated.³ They have economic, political and social insights and connections in their home countries, all of which are waiting to be tapped.

There is evidence that demographic changes are transforming the global economy:

1. The 2008 Australian report, *Building Strength and Innovation*⁴, shows that human capital is central to innovation. Karpin identifies the need to capitalise on all the talents available in a diverse workforce. Recommendation 5.2 states that Australian innovation policies should be aligned with immigration policies to ensure that they facilitate Australia's access to the global talent pool.

2. According to Statistics Canada, by 2011 immigration will account for 100% of Canada's net labour force growth and for all net population growth over the next 25 years. Polls of prospective emigrant's worldwide show that the Toronto Region, whose workforce that I am most familiar with, is top-of-scale as a positive destination. 'Like attracts like' in that this region is known to be multicultural and so immigrants choose to come here. Richard Florida speaks to the 'creative class' and asks, 'Who's your city?'⁵

While Toronto is not perfect with regard to the integration of new IEPs into the workforce, there has been noteworthy progress. For example, the recently established Fairness Commission⁶ charged with helping IEPs receive licensing faster is a good initiative; as are TRIEC, Allies and the Maytree Foundation⁶.



3. In *The World of Work*, Marshall Goldsmith and Sheila Madden illustrate the extent to which the global economy and workforce is being transformed:⁷ The most significant according to World Trade Organization estimates, that as of 2010, 70% of the Global 1000 workforce are projected to be non native English speakers. Add to that the belief that leadership communication skills across cultures, are necessary for workforce engagement—which, by the way, is at an all time low.

Regardless of the client—whether a corporation, a domestically educated client transition, or an IEP—the CI benefits or business case are the same, yet the perspective is very different.

ENGAGEMENT OF THE TALENT POOL

Attracting, retaining and motivating people have become more difficult in a changing world where human capital and a shrinking talent pool have become the drivers. When demographics shift to the degree that skills shortage makes stringent adjustments necessary, the specific experience and language of potential employees, will be less important than their competencies.

INNOVATION

Identifying and capitalising on opportunities both internally, to improve products and services, and externally to expand trade, will strengthen innovation as a competitive advantage⁸.

Philippe Legrain⁹ argues that innovation comes not from individuals but from groups of talented people sparring off each other. Foreigners with different ideas, perspectives and experiences add something extra. This can be summed up as: diversity=difference= innovation.

Multi-nationals are able to grow and develop faster and more efficiently than their solely domestic counterparts by funnelling thought and action into a single, multi-streamed direction.

WORKFORCE DIVERSIFICATION

Hadi Mahabadi, Vice President of the Xerox Research Centre of Canada (XRCC), suggests that the company's innovation (as demonstrated by the growth in the number of patents), was driven by diversifying their workforce to employ the best talent available, and through relying on the skill sets acquired in their employees home countries.

Proctor and Gamble¹⁰ is another example of an organisation with an operating philosophy that diversity outperforms homogeneity.

OPTIMISATION

In 2002, it appeared to me that stakeholders in the Toronto region were not making optimal use of immigrants skills and experience. I persuaded these stakeholders that this was a serious issue. As a result and along with partners, I founded and secured financing for a conference specifically for IEPs. Its purpose was to provide IEPs with information and resources needed to integrate into the Toronto/Canadian world of work.¹¹

Because there was a need for all stakeholders to start appreciating the many benefits of this rich talent pool in a multicultural city, a significant secondary

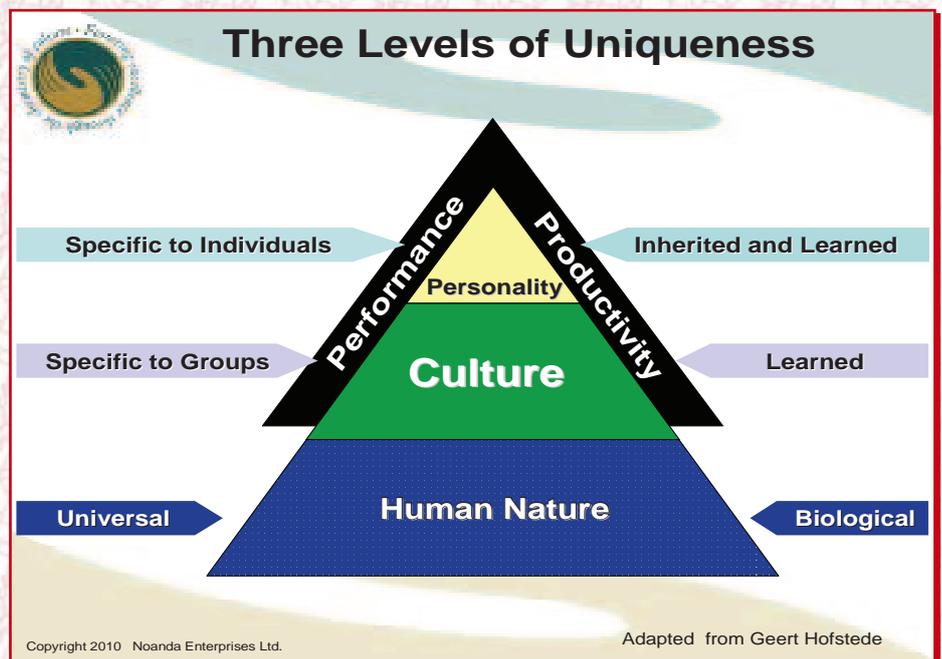
goal was to provide a dialogue and collaboration structure. This annual conference now provides the opportunity for stakeholders such as employers, licensing bodies, associations, educational facilities and IEPs themselves, to understand the positive impact that cultural intelligence could have on performance and productivity.

The main opportunity within this increasing diverse workforce globally is cultural difference. Capitalising on this opportunity depends on understanding what CI is and how it can be applied.

ACQUIRING CI

People around the world are the same (physiologically) yet different; and each individual has his or own unique personality shaped by many factors. Gert Hofstede describes culture as the 'software of the mind'¹². It is the shared, often unspoken understandings in a group; the meaning-making.

Consideration to culture from a national perspective and its impact on working groups and teams has not been perceived as a priority. Traditionally, career professionals assessed clients personalities using tools that have most often been developed from a western perspective¹³. However, culture and its impact on working groups and teams were typically not viewed from a national perspective but rather on organisation by organisation basis. Organisational culture was defined simply as 'the way we do things here'. In combination, both culture



and personality influence performance and productivity. As a consequence CI is becoming a core management skill and organisational strategy for the global workplace.

Differing national views of the world can pose challenges but also opportunities for career professionals to learn how to help their clients work successfully and together, in multi-cultural environments. For example, Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede show how people from a number of countries and ages interpreted differently, an ambiguous sketch of a man whose arm was on a woman in front of him¹⁴. A myriad of interpretations occur because people concentrate on different aspects of an image. In this instance, some looked for physical attributes; others looked for family or hierarchical relationships; still others looked for gender differences, cooperation, and signs of conflict or for details that highlight professional or religious roles.

Managing cultural differences means addressing the *visible* and the *invisible*. The visible are easily noted in cultural festivals, music, food and clothes. Where it gets interesting is seeing different behaviours and understanding the why behind them—the root values shaped by factors such as family, history, education and government practices.

STARTING POINTS

CI provides a framework and language to understand and capitalise on differences rather than tolerate or ignore the (potentially creative) friction caused by difference¹⁵. CI has been rigorously researched over decades by many researchers around the world. It is a starting point, a generalisation to make sense of complexity.

To be more culturally intelligent, employees, employers and career professionals need to¹⁶:

1. develop knowledge of the perspectives fostered by their own culture and of others
2. practise mindfulness by paying detailed attention to behaviours and contexts (rather than being unaware of cultural characteristics for individual countries); and
3. start developing a repertoire of behaviour that is adaptive and works across varying cultures.

Dimensions of national culture have been determined through identified issues common to all societies¹⁷. These can be defined as a continuum between two poles (both being right) and are an aspect of culture that can be measured relative to other cultures. Value dimensions provide starting points for a CI framework to navigate building engagement with clients from other countries. Useful starting points when working with multicultural clients or employees are:

Concept of self (individualistic or collectivistic)

Imagine a photo with one individual standing in front of a group. People in western countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand would describe the person as the leader; their counterparts in collectivistic societies might say that the lone person was an outcast.

Most of the world is considered collectivistic and an example of such a perspective is when an IEP refers to group accomplishments (rather than those achieved on their own) in their résumés. And, referring back to the client at the beginning of this article who never chose his own career path, he probably came from a collectivistic

society where what was best for the group, directed his own career.

Power Distance (the extent a society expects and accepts the unequal distribution of power among members of its population)

Hofstede's IBM database reveals a high power-distance for most Asian countries while the US, Great Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand show low values¹⁸. The kernel of understanding here rests on *dependence*. Power-status and privilege go together. For example, in low power-distance countries, initiative is valued by managers and consultation is often the norm. In contrast, in high power-distance countries, managers or bosses tend to be more autocratic or paternalistic and respect is shown with lack of eye contact, doing as told and speaking when spoken to—all in deference to the father or master figure, the boss or the teacher.

Thinking back to the earlier scenario where the employer complained of needing to baby-sit a new IEP, it's probably that this person originated from a high power distance country where managers tend to be very task specific and initiative is not considered

Managing Cultural Differences:
'the visible and the invisible'



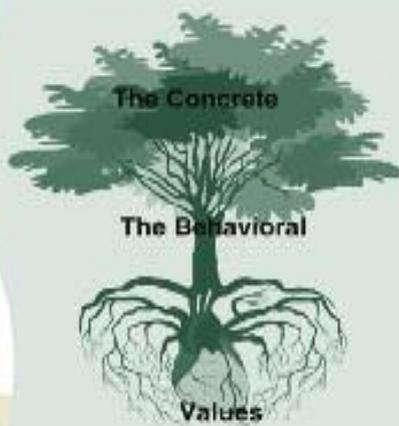
Three Levels

1. **Concrete**
clothes, music, food, festivals
2. ***Behavioral reflects our values**
such as language, gender roles,
3. **Values** (more abstract and the glue)

Examples of Value Dimensions

Identity: Self versus group
Hierarchy: Power Distance

Source: Adapted from Three Levels of Culture Hildago (1993)



As a career professional when you meet somebody from another country, which of these categories (concrete, behavior, or values) do you use to understand them culturally? Is your attempt to understand others culturally consistent with how you want to be viewed and understood?

respectful to the manager. In essence, the job of the manager in high power distance cultures is to tell the employee precisely what to do.

Communication
(low and high context)

Interaction styles differ culturally¹⁹. At the high end, there is an emphasis on non verbal behaviour and context. In these cultures, little has to be said or written because most of the information is either in the physical environment or assumed to be known. This is typical of collectivistic societies and their 'In-Groups'. For example, in a client consultation with an IEP nodding his or her head up and down, the Toronto career professional took this as a 'yes' agreement on an action — but in reality, it was only a 'yes I hear you' (and serves as an example of non verbal communication typically seen in high context societies)²⁰.

Low context is more situation-specific. Typically, the mass of information is in the explicit code seen in individualistic western cultures. Since the western assumption is verbal delivery seems less intimidating, feedback for instance, is often immediate. Appreciating not all clients prefer feedback the same way, a written note saves face in some cultural contexts.

SUMMARY

These initial points aim to provoke interest and demonstrate that it is

important to decode cultural lenses. Each person is shaped by many factors and this is more complicated than any cultural norm could suggest. A simple first step is to Google *Hofstede* together with a clients country of origin, to get a just-in-time overview.

The key is to explore cultural differences and then build on the similarities between each. The following script is one proven method to facilitate an educational process for both parties:²¹

- What do you call this (situation, issue, challenge)?
- Can you help me understand what it might look like in your country (or in your world of work)?
- What do you think has caused this?
- In this country of business, as an example, this is what is expected...
- Next steps can be...?

In essence, the career professional and client are encouraged to hold up a mirror of new insights for each other.

Discover the invisible by seeking to discover the clients cultural lens and demonstrate a mutuality of respect. Research has shown that CI²² can anticipate and clarify a cultures behaviour. That insight assists in making better decisions and increases the effectiveness of performance. Such diversity of thinking equals innovation which supports competitiveness and economic development.

Career professionals can be recognised as being a valuable resource to achieving business objectives for the client (employer or employee) and for the profession when they gain knowledge, are mindful and grow their own CI. And as the global marketplace continues to be influenced by cultural complexity, those who successfully navigate global cultural difference will win in a highly competitive market.

Rhonda is a business focused visionary with over 25 years experience in progressively senior level positions within corporate, public sector, health care and non-profit environments. In her current role as President of Noanda Enterprises Ltd. in Canada, she consults to organisations on the myriad implications of the 'chemistry of culture': notably, how to optimize productivity through mindfulness, knowledge, and skills specifically addressing country, functional and organisational cultures. Rhonda is also a board member of the Association Career Professional International Toronto Network.

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