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Multiple cultures in the workplace

Summary

South Africa and the African continent at large host a diversity of cultures that must be accommodated by business as customers, workers or associates. South Africa's recent re-acceptance into the international community has increased the potential number of cultures with which organisations have to cope. Culture affects such diverse matters as motivation, negotiation strategy, training needs and marketing approaches. It is affected mainly by religion, language, region or group, and values. These influences on culture manifest themselves in aspects such as collectivism or individualism, communication context, consciousness of time, interpersonal roles and workplace needs. In order for management and labour to accommodate various cultures in the working environment, information on the many implications of culture is essential.

Kultuurverskeidenheid in die werkplek

Suid-Afrika en die res van die Afrika-kontinent spog met 'n groot verskeidenheid kulture wat deur die sakewêreld geakkommodeer moet word — of dit nou as klante, werkers of medewerkers is. Die onlangse hertoelating van Suid-Afrika tot die internasionale gemeenskap het die potensiële aantal kulture waarmee organisasies moet kan saamwerk, vermeerder. Kultuur beïnvloed uiteenlopende sake soos motivering, onderhandelingstrategie, opleidingsbehoeftes en bemarkings-benaderings. Dit word hoofsaaklik beïnvloed deur godsdiens, taal, streek of groep, en waardes. Hierdie invloede kom na vore in aspekte soos kollektiwisme of individualisme, kommunikasiekonteks, tydbewustheid, interpersoonlike rolver-deling en behoeftes in die werkplek. As bestuur en arbeid verskillende kulture in die werksomgewing moet akkommodeer, is inligting oor die vele implikasies van kultuur nodig.

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As business becomes more international, organisations have to function across cultures. Within firms there is also a realisation that diversity of religion, language, race, gender and personal values among staff represents a source of competitive strength. The more people know about each other, the better they can work together as a team towards the achievement of organisational objectives.[1]

South Africa's internal diversity and its re-acceptance into the international community has rendered training in multicultural issues essential. Such training can enhance the functioning of organisations by making managers and other workers more sensitive to the often conflicting cultural characteristics of the people in their own and in other organisations. These characteristics affect various aspects of business, such as motivation, nonverbal communication, group functioning, leave requirements, ethical values, consciousness of time, training needs, marketing approaches and social behaviour.

This paper will introduce the key influences on culture, explain certain cultural characteristics and provide examples of their manifestation in the workplace. Relevant implications for managers are explored and guidelines for the South African manager are provided.

1. A definition of culture

Corporate (organisational) culture may be defined as:

> the set of key values, beliefs, understandings, and norms shared by members of an organization. Culture represents the unwritten, informal norms that bind organization members together (Daft 1991: 75).

Individual culture may be defined as:

> ... things people believe in and the way they do them (Batten 1995: 46-7).

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1   This paper is based mainly on Dadoo *et al* (1997), which provides more detail on the topics covered.

In both the corporate and the individual sense, culture therefore relates to a person's underlying beliefs, manifest in behaviour. This paper will focus on individual culture.

2. Avoiding stereotypes

Any discussion of broad cultural differences should guard against reinforcing the habit of judging people according to stereotypes. In South Africa in particular, differences between people have in the past been politicised in order to promote particular interests (Human 1997:15-6). Lawuyi (1997: 86) refers to the use of differences as "an instrument of colonial control and exploitation" while Wright (1998: 8,11) mentions the outdated cultural view which sees people as identical, homogeneous individuals with clearly defined characteristics. Lenclud (1996: 11) reminds us that cultures differ less from each other than ethnography would suggest, and that the emphasis on differences instead of similarities among cultures is a conscious choice made by the observer. It should also be borne in mind that not all members of a particular group exercise their culture in the same way. Variations based on socio-economic background, education and personality are important. All discussions on culture should therefore be interpreted as being generally rather than specifically relevant. For instance, there is often greater similarity between people belonging to the same socio-economic bracket than between those sharing a common religion, race, language or value. In this regard Knowles (1999: 130) states:

> Consideration of individual lives, as we have shown, brings endless variation to racial categories making it possible to take into account important differences between occupants of the same categories.

Although referring to race only, the point made is valid for all dimensions of culture. Human (1997: 18) proposes that we

> accept that broad general national or ethnic differences do exist, but that, at the same time, individuals have a complex series of social identities to which we need to respond.

With these caveats in mind, the purpose of this article is not to stereotype, but to provide information to enable businesses to cater for and be sensitive to the needs of the various cultures they have to

accommodate. Heron & Pauw (1998: 97) stress similar objectives, namely the encouragement of cross-cultural understanding at an 'everyday' level, the opening-up of interpersonal and intercultural communication channels, and the desire for mutual understanding across political, economic and social divides.

3. Key influences on culture

The most important influences on an individual's culture are religion, language, region or group, and values. Each influence will be explained briefly, using examples related mainly to the workplace.

3.1 Religion

Religion is probably the dominant influence on culture, because it shapes the manner in which an individual experiences and copes with the world. It also affects perceptions about what is desirable, or undesirable, and how one should behave. Three examples will suffice:

- In African society, religion is intertwined with everyday life and also affects the workplace. When a worker is troubled and unhappy, s/he may need to take time off to see an expert on spiritual matters. The supervisor or manager should be sympathetic to these needs.
- One of the obligatory daily prayer times for Muslims occurs during lunchtime, another during afternoon tea. If no mosque is available close to the workplace, a clean and quiet place is required. During the fasting month of Ramadaan, Muslims do not require lunch or tea breaks. At social functions, a Muslim may not consume pork or alcohol. Traditional Western businesses do not accommodate such needs.
- In catering for Hindus, it should be borne in mind that individuals may be vegetarian, or may simply abstain from eating beef. For a Hindu woman, too, wearing bangles and nose studs is a matter of culture rather than of fashion.

3.2 Language

Language provides the framework within which an individual thinks and expresses him/herself. In this way it shapes the concept of the self

and the environment. Language affects behaviour and is in turn influenced by it. Examples of culture-specific language abound:

- The African love of cattle finds expression in various ways. In the Sotho language, the word *kgomo* for 'ox' is used figuratively for anything of value (Kriel 1989: 141). A diamond, for instance, could be referred to as the 'ox of the earth'.
- A local potato chip manufacturer uses the Swahili word for a lion, *simba*, as a trade name. From a marketing point of view, this word is uncomfortably similar to the Zulu word *zimba*, which refers to defecation.
- The Japanese do not have a word for 'decision-making'. For them, one only decides when the problem has been mastered. They prefer the word 'choose', which suggests a difficult selection among options, with both gain and loss being involved (Lane & DiStefano 1992: 130).

3.3 Region or group

This dimension of culture includes all those aspects that have traditionally been recognised as differentiating people — whether because of geographical area, country, nation, race or ethnic group. A few examples may be given:

- The Chinese philosophy of *feng shui* seeks to maintain harmony between the human being and the natural environment. *Feng shui* principles can be applied in the workplace too. A reception desk should not be placed directly facing the front door, lest the firm's money 'go out via the door'. Mirrors may be placed in a window to reflect any negative influences emanating from disharmonious neighbourhood. Strategically placed plants or water in an office will enhance well-being or health. In a multinational team including Chinese people, the advice of a *feng shui* master should be obtained in the case of a work problem. The manager need not understand or even accept the underlying principles—s/he should simply have the problem diagnosed and corrected. By contrast, Africans experiencing spiritual problems in a work team will probably regard the matter as personal and seek their own solution. Any attempt on the part of the manager or the firm to become involved, or to seek advice from a traditional diviner or

similar adviser on behalf of workers, would in all likelihood be viewed with suspicion.

- An Arab may spend several hours getting to know a visiting businessman socially before broaching the subject of business. Pressurising the Arab host would probably not be conducive to business, because establishing a sound personal relationship is crucial and precedes most business transactions. This generally holds true of South Americans and Africans.

- A Korean's name is his/her personal property and should not be used casually. To address a person by name is an affront in most social circumstances. One should rather refer indirectly to the person using a relevant title such as 'president' or 'teacher'. In business, this means that one does not introduce two Koreans: the senior person initiates his own introduction. Even then, names are not said aloud, but read softly from the other party's business card. Asking a person to repeat his/her name may well be construed as an insult (Harris & Moran 1991: 418-22).

- Business cards are essential to introductions in the East, but less important among Africans, because cards do not convey important information about a one's background and family. While a business card is useful for reference, it fails to establish a sound contact. The relationship and interest shown during the introduction are more important in securing a profitable business relationship.

3.4 Values

Irrespective of personal convictions, business leadership has to be sensitive to the existence of a range of values among its employees. Values that may be relevant here include gender issues and gay interests. Two examples will suffice:

- The steady advance of women into leadership positions in business has been artificially retarded by cultural stereotypes relating to gender roles and by a tendency to undervalue women's work, whether in the domestic or the business sphere. Jandt (1995: 184-5) reminds us that in terms of business ability there is actually more variation within each sex than between the sexes.

- Gay people experience workplace problems in two areas in

particular. In the first place the person and the problems are often viewed only in relation to his/her sexual orientation. When something unusual occurs, an illness, for example, it is often attributed to the gay person's lifestyle. Secondly, the partners of gay employees may be excluded from company benefits such as medical aid. Similarly, the couple may also decline invitations to social functions in order to avoid potential embarrassment (Richards & McNaught, quoted in Dadoo *et al* 1997: 158-9).

Having examined the major influences on culture, some characteristics of culture will now be discussed.

4. Characteristics of culture

The work-related characteristics of culture were first explored by Hofstede in a landmark study of 1980. In the African context, the four pertinent characteristics of culture are: collectivism vs individualism; high-context vs low-context communication; consciousness of time; power differentials and role relationships. Each characteristic will be briefly discussed below.

4.1 Collectivism vs individualism

Groups with a collective consciousness include Africans, Japanese, Malaysians, Indians, Turks and some South American nations. Collectivists regard the goals of the group as more important than those of the individual — the individual can only progress by means of participation in the group. Every member is economically and socially tied to the others in the group, and great importance is attached to group harmony and co-operation. The group protects the interests of its members. Different values may be applied to the group and to outsiders, which explains why certain behaviour by a group member may be accepted, while an outsider would be scorned for it. Collectivists tend to regard only group decisions as legitimate.

Most Westerners from idustrialised nations, by contrast, have an individual consciousness. Individualists regard each person as unique and personal goals as more important than group goals. Individual achievement is highly valued, and people are entitled to form and

express their own opinions and make their own decisions. There are few limitations on association or friendship.

A selection of examples of the manifestation of collectivism and individualism in various cultures are relevant here:

- When a business conflict arises in Japan, the opposing parties will usually try to reconcile their differences. (In a more individualistic culture, the opposing parties may try to establish who is to blame). As a result, business disputes in Japan are seldom taken to court. The loss of face caused by such direct confrontation would render any future business between the parties impossible.
- In Korea and Malaysia, feedback on the performance of a subordinate should be given indirectly, since a negative appraisal could cause loss of face and of harmony in the group. Corrective feedback may be given via a trusted intermediary or by withholding favours (Hofstede 1995: 157). In South Africa, feedback may be given directly, as long as it is done with respect for the individual.
- In Africa, collectivism finds a unique expression in the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which asserts that a person is a person only through others. Key values of *Ubuntu* include group solidarity, conformity, compassion, respect, human dignity and collective unity (Mbigi & Maree 1995: 1-2).
- An African worker's loyalty may be divided between the group and the workplace. This may result from a traditional feeling of alienation from business enterprises run in the Western style, as opposed to a style dependent on group sanction, protection, and even economic support in times of hardship.
- In Turkey, about 1 250 state-employed road workers, frustrated by restrictive union laws that made striking difficult and expensive, tried other means of gaining higher wages. First they stopped shaving, then they walked to work barefoot, then they all reported sick. In desperation they finally lined up outside the court buildings to file for mass divorce on the grounds of poverty. The workers explained that they could no longer bear themselves with honour in front of their spouses due to their low wages (Mead 1994: 236, quoting Reuters and *The Chicago Tribune*).
- Through their leadership, the CEOs of large companies enable

their firms to flourish financially. Their remuneration is often correspondingly high — indeed, it is regarded by some as exorbitant. From an individualist perspective, the contributions of these people to a company is critical and their rewards are well-deserved.

4.2 High-context vs low-context communication

In high-context communication much is implied and less needs to be explicitly stated. Nonverbal communication, including body language, plays a large role. High-context communication is common in most Asian, African, Arab and Latin American countries. An outsider will normally not follow what is being communicated, because a substantial portion of any such message is implied by the context and remains unsaid. In low-context communication, all information is made explicit, in frank and detailed discussion. Low-context communication is found in most industrialised Western countries.

Perhaps the best example of low-context communication is a business contract, which often contains a clause stating that the full agreement has been recorded in writing and that no verbal or other amendments have any legal standing. The meaning of such low-context communication differs among cultures. The Japanese typically expect contracts to be adapted as circumstances change. To mainland Chinese, a written contract is a foreign concept. It may be signed simply to humour the Westerner, with little intention of honouring its terms. Instead, the agreement will be sorted out and renegotiated as the work proceeds. The Greek approach tends to be similar: a contract is merely a landmark along the road—the agreement is only final once the work is completed. In the Arab world, insistence on a written contract may be regarded as an insult, because a man's word is his bond. The traditional African practice is to conclude agreements verbally, in the presence of witnesses. In high-context cultures a Westerner should accept that a good relationship and a verbal agreement may be more efficacious than a written contract.

4.3 Consciousness of time

In the West, time is experienced as linear and monochronic, while the Chinese perception of time is polychronic and cyclical, with little difference between the past and the present. In the business context, this affects planning, since there is no rigid adherence to schedules. Instead, the focus is on people and on projects to be completed (Kirkbride & Westwood 1993: 328). The perception that people are more important than schedules is generally shared by Africans. For example, a person on the way to a meeting may receive an unexpected visitor and feel socially obliged to greet the visitor, enquire about the family and even offer to assist with whatever caused the visitor's sudden appearance. This may result in the person's being late for the meeting. Such lateness will be tolerated more readily by Africans than by Westerners. The French perception of time is also flexible, implying that one is punctual when possible. Meetings are often held without any agenda and working hours may be long.

In Ethiopia, the time taken to make a decision is directly related to its importance. Low-ranking officials will consequently try to elevate the status of their work by postponing decisions — thereby delaying the work. Westerners who try to be quick and efficient may inadvertently downgrade the value of the work in the eyes of the locals (Lane & DiStefano 1992: 87).

In Western cultures, urgent or important tasks are normally given precedence. However, one should avoid insisting on fast service in the Middle East, as this may be interpreted as rudeness. In the Arab world, the time required for a task may depend on relative status or on the relationship between the parties involved. Important people receive efficient service from those deemed less important. Close relatives may be given priority, while others have to wait (Lane & DiStefano 1992: 87). The Arab view of time also differents from that current in the West. A business appointment scheduled for ten in the morning may take place at any time after ten that morning. And when it does take place, a Westerner may find that no business at all is discussed. First the parties must get to know each other, often over coffee. Such an initial meeting may even be conducted with

more than one person at the same time, the unrelated meetings having been scheduled to take place together.

4.4 Power differentials and role relationships

People in cultures with high power differentials accepted inequality more readily than those in cultures with low power differentials. Military hierarchies provide the archetypical example of high power differentials: superiors are treated with awe and subordinates with disdain.

High power differentials are typically found in the Arab states and in Malaysia, as well as in some South American and some African countries. In the Middle East, governments tend to have more authority than in the West. Businesses and government departments are dominated by the ruling elite, who wield absolute power. Management in cultures with high power differentials is characterised by close supervision and significant perceived differences between hierarchical levels. Tact is essential for survival in an organisation, and personal loyalty is prized.

High power differentials are also associated with the prevalence of hierarchies. This may be illustrated with reference to France, where hierarchies flourish and decentralisation is limited. In particular, the following characteristics are typical of French organisations: centralised power and decision-making, clearly differentiated hierarchical ranks, with little communication between levels, but egalitarianism within them. Other characteristics include a formal management style, the absolute authority of managers and the avoidance of face-to-face conflict through the creation of and obedience to impersonal rules. While the typical American manager's position and organisational structure flow from the goals to be achieved, for the French manager, status, power and authority are the priorities (Lane & DiStefano 1992: 119; Mead 1994: 102, quoting Crozier; Peterson 1993: 418 and Rojot 1993: 75).

Low power differentials are associated with greater equality and freedom of expression. In Hofstede's 1980 study of various cultures, Austria had the lowest power differential. This implies that managers employ consultative decision-making and use expertise

power as a basis for influencing subordinates. Formal authority is not emphasised and organisational hierarchy is merely a convenience (Hais & Schicklgruber 1993: 143). Other countries where power differentials are low include the USA, Denmark and Sweden. In Sweden, the organisational structures of companies are usually very flat, which reflects the low power differentials of Swedish culture. It is common for a Swedish manager to make tea for himself and his guests, instead of being served by a secretary (Selmer 1993: 113-29).

Africans tend to view a company as an extended family. Mbigi & Maree (1995) have suggested that the organisational culture of the South African business should be modelled on the African village, but this could create suspicion. The most appropriate way of adapting a business to the African context is to have a firm run in the Western style, but with a communal value system incorporated into the corporate (organisational) culture. In his thought-provoking book, Koopman (1991) gives an in-depth discussion on the successful implementation of such a concept.

5. Some implications for management models

Management models and techniques developed in one culture will not necessarily be effective in another culture. Some may not work at all, while others may require adaptation, as is illustrated by the examples which follow.

The model referred to as management by objectives (MBO) was developed in the USA. In this model, subordinates negotiate and agree on suitable objectives with their superiors. The model assumes a culture where such negotiation is accepted. Hofstede (1995: 157) mentions that MBO had to be adapted for use in Germany, where it has become a more formal process, and objectives are determined jointly by the team. In Austria, with its low power differential, MBO has been implemented as "management by joint goal setting" (Hais & Schicklgruber 1993: 143). In South Africa the choice between individual or joint determination of objectives would also depend on wether the subordinate's culture were individualistic or collectivistic.

Participative management in its various forms is effective in cultures with a low power differential, such as the USA or Austria.

In France, where the power differential is great, participative management is not popular. In Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands, participative management is taken to extremes in their "industrial democracy" processes (Lane & DiStefano 1992: 114, 116). Consultation of all affected parties is important among Africans, and consultative and participative management are thus logical models to apply.

Quality control was introduced to Japan by the USA after the Second World War. In its current implementation it involves small groups of workers meeting regularly to discuss improvements in quality and other work-related matters. In Hong Kong quality control has not been applied as successfully, apparently because of differences between the values of management and workers (Evans *et al* 1995: 131-132). The matter of common values should be resolved before instituting a quality control system in South Africa or in other African countries. One aspect in particular requires clarification: to what extent should workers be loyal and follow orders, and to what extent should they use their own initiative?

Although self-actualisation may be the ultimate motivator for a Westerner, other needs (for a Japanese, at a social level, or for an Arab esteem) may be more important in a specific situation. In general, mainland Chinese tend to value monetary and social achievements more than self-actualisation. In one instance, some workers willingly gave up their productivity-linked pay increases so as not to incur the censure of their less productive colleagues. Thai workers may also react negatively to individual incentive schemes (Mead 1994: 208, quoting Mann). In East Africa, striving for individual achievement could even be regarded as deviant, because of the domination of social needs over individual needs (Mead 1994: 208, quoting Mutiso). In the West, the individual is the model for job design, performance measurement and motivation. In collectivist societies such as those in Asia and Africa, individuals may surrender to the needs of the group in order to gain security and protection (Kirkbride & Westwood 1993: 328). In Arabia, honour and respect are important motivators (Moore 1993). This also applies to Africans: in South Africa, an African worker will respond to monetary incentives and to interesting work, but respect, good

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working conditions and open lines of communication are more important. Motivation is spontaneous when a worker senses that he or she is working for the right employer. In this respect, the African worker is similar to the Japanese.

Traditional African economic systems are based on people working together within a community that looks after all its members. The preferred economic system for Africans would thus appear to be based on communal economic activity, not unlike the *kibbutz* system in Israel. The internal operation of a *kibbutz* is communal, but towards the outside world it acts in a capitalist manner, to the benefit of its members. Communal systems do not always work, though, as may be illustrated by an experiment with communal farming systems in Tanzania. Acting on the advice of the Maoist Chinese, the government herded farmers into self-help communal villages. The farmers had been accustomed to subsistence farming on scattered smallholdings, and the experiment was a dismal failure (*Economist* 1996).

6. Implications for South African managers

Apart from Western influences, managers in South Africa are also exposed to African thought. This section will explore certain elements of management style appropriate to South Africa.

Africans are collectivists. This is evident in all aspects of the work environment, as well as in management. While in Britain the authority of a manager is regarded as vesting in the person, in Africa a manager's authority flows from and vests in the group.

The collectivist approach applies, for example, when recognising achievement. It is acceptable to reward an individual, but credit should also be given to the group to which the individual belongs. A manager should view workers not as individuals, but as a group with common interests and goals that they may achieve together. The traditional allegiance to a local chief may be replaced by allegiance to the company, where workers will strive to achieve together, not unlike the Japanese.

The most appropriate management style for a work-force consisting mainly of African workers is participative management.

African workers want to be consulted and involved in decision-making. Individuals should not make major decisions — teams should. This principle appears to be impacting on South African firms. In a recent study conducted among human resource managers, respondents ranked the introduction of participative management third in importance out of seventeen typical human resource activities (Hofmeyr *et al* 1995: 111). In Israel, business decision-making often emerges from a process of open argument. The process is "very vocal, emotional and participative". Leadership is natural, not based on formal authority (Harpaz & Meshoulam 1993: 209, quoting Aharoni). The Japanese consultative decision-making approach is similar to the traditional African style and may fruitfully be studied for application in South Africa. The paternalism of Japanese managers also parallels the traditional African patriarchal society. Of late, however, there has been a reaction against all forms of paternalism in South Africa.

Respect is very important, especially if the subordinate concerned is older than the supervisor, or is an important member of his or her community. Protecting 'face' is important in many societies, including Africa. As with the Chinese, African culture is one of 'shame', not of guilt. One should be wary of criticising one's manager, or of showing disrespect to an elder.

As in Arabia and Malaysia, Africans in leadership positions may be reluctant to admit that an error has been made. The leader may say 'I interpreted this differently', rather than admit to personal error. This trait is true in a wider sense too — if a worker loses a tool, s/he would rather not state that s/he lost the tool, but perhaps that 'the tool lost me'. This all relates to saving face.

7. Conclusion

This discussion has merely introduced the extensive topic of culture in business. It should be evident from the examples given that in developing an indigenous and appropriate management style for South Africa, managers should be wary of philosophies originating in the USA and Britain. This is especially true when the majority of the staff are African. Managers should look instead to Africa, the Middle

East, Asia, and certain European countries. Here are a few examples of fruitful areas to be explored, with suggestions on where to obtain more information:

- the approaches to collectivism found in Japan (Garrison 1996; Taylor 1993) and Malaysia (DiStefano 1992; Garsombke & Garsombke 1993);
- the Japanese social principles of harmony, community and avoidance of confrontation (Goldenberg 1988; Taylor 1993);
- the relaxed attitude towards time and the culture of honour (as opposed to shame) encountered in Arab countries (Elashmawi & Harris 1993; Moore 1993);
- participative decision-making in Germany (Molz 1993; Stewart *et al* 1996), Sweden (Rodrigues 1996; Selmer 1993) and the Netherlands
- the relaxed attitude towards organisational hierarchies in Austria (Hais & Schicklgruber 1993; Rodrigues 1996);
- the German tradition that the company is responsible for the welfare of workers (Molz 1993; Rodrigues 1996; Stewart *et al* 1996), and
- Israel's very vocal and participative decision-making process (Harpaz & Meshoulam 1993).

For more detailed information on these subjects, the reader is referred to the indispensable book by Peterson (1993), which covers all the areas listed. Two other excellent books on culture in the business context are by Harris & Moran (1991) and by Mead (1994). Koopman (1991) has extensive coverage on the impact of African culture on firms in South Africa. It is essential reading for all local managers and for those of foreign firms entering the country. A new South African book by Dadoo *et al* (1997) also provides wide-ranging coverage of culture in the workplace.

This discussion has probably raised more questions than it has answered, but it should have identified some issues that need to be addressed in multicultural management. It should be borne in mind that culture is dynamic and continually changing. Differences in management practices and techniques will thus tend to become less distinct over time, because managers in all cultures will strive to use the best available methods of achieving corporate goals, using an increasingly global workforce.

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